

# Pre-convention Bulletin #13 / January 21, 2013

for members only

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<u>Documents</u>	Page
<b>Community Branches</b> Peter L., New York City	<b>2</b>
<b>Towards a More Productive Mode of Discussion and Debate</b> Doug S., Boulder	<b>5</b>
<b>San Diego's Struggle with Gender Parity and the Formation of a Women and Trans* Caucus</b> Zakiya K., Selena M., Norma V., San Diego	<b>10</b>
<b>Assessing the 2013 General Disciplinary Procedures</b> Holly L., Austin	<b>14</b>

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## Inside This Bulletin

This is the thirteenth 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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Documents

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## **Community Branches**

At the root of much of the discussion organizational stagnation or lack of growth in the ISO is a question of our “community” or “city” branches – in general, our non-student branches – where the majority of our members are located but have experienced little growth.

This is the product of an insufficient understanding of what the ISO project is in branches that are located in neighborhoods.

Our political perspectives, especially in the last two years, have emphasized the contradictions and difficulties of the period. We have, however, not figured out how to translate those perspectives into organization approaches that successfully build a base.

This August and September in New York City, we have recently undergone a major debate about how to organize our branches and movement fractions. Some comrades argued for us to organize on the basis of movement fractions, with a district projection and membership development fraction, while the district committee put forward a hybrid proposal that alternated branch meetings with fractions.

While others are in a better position to assess the overall results of the shift, it seems to me that we tried to do two things at the same time and ended up doing neither effectively. Branches did not meet often enough to develop a strong internal life, nor were fractions anchored enough to pull their periphery into the organization. While branches aimed to build “political hubs” in particular neighborhoods, they were unable to because, in general, they were not rooted in any particular political activity or relationships.

The first step in being able to successfully resolve these problems is to develop a better understanding of how to build branches rooted in working class neighborhoods.

We can only hope to begin a discussion and debate around our theory of how to build branches communities during this pre-convention period. But we need a more specific approach, theoretically and practically, than we have had in the past.

Comrades Brian C., in his document in Internal Bulletin #2 this fall, and Steve L. and Leela Y., in PreConvention Bulletin #7, have done an admirable job in beginning that debate by concrete examinations of the approaches taken in Providence and Seattle, respectively. Brian’s in particular is a detailed analysis of how to look at organizing in “city” branches and – although some of his premises tend towards the economic – deserves careful study.

We can also draw on the history of the left for a number of historical models or precedents. I would argue that we have something to learn from these experiences even though they fall, for the most part, outside the classical Marxist tradition.

### **Historical Models – ‘Serve the People’ and Alinsky Organizing**

The most common model of “community organizing” on the left is the legacy of the “Serve the People” approach pioneered by the 1960s radicals in Maoist-influenced organizations, particularly the Black Panthers and Young Lords.

Similar (although with different political roots) is the strategy outlined by Saul Alinsky in “Rules for Radicals” and also adopted by much of the 60’s new left.

Neither approach has a particularly working class focus, and are instead organized around the idea of a homogenous geographical community.

For Alinsky, an amorphous mass of “Have Nots” have to be organized against the “Haves,” while many of the Maoist or Maoist-influenced organizations thought of themselves as working within an internal colony of oppressed peoples, in the manner analogous to the successful anticolonial revolts of the period in Africa and Asia.

However, both begin by assessing the “felt needs” of communities, and trying to address those immediate needs. In the case of “serve the people strategies,” this took the form of breakfast programs or neighborhood cleanup operations. These were accompanied by ideological education and distribution of literature. In the case of the Young Lords, occupation was a common tactic, as with their takeover of the local South Bronx Hospital to win better health care treatment for the community.

Alinsky focused more on protest tactics and ways to threaten the “Establishment” with mass actions that were beyond the comfort zone of those in power. He argued for building explicitly radical organizations (rather than single-issue coalitions) that “organized to get rid of the four-legged rats in order to get rid of the two-legged rats,” although he did not have a vision for the socialist transformation of society.

Organizing around the urgent issues felt by community members led to impressive struggles and significant successes in a variety of urban contexts in the late 60s and early 70s. Key to those victories was a sense of building around important demands felt by working class and poor people in a particular geographic area – perhaps not a workplace, but nevertheless an important concentration of workers who could make their demands felt if properly organized.

### **The Communist Party**

By far the most successful approach to building rooted neighborhood organizations in the history of the US Left belongs to the Communist Party in the 1930s.

While much of the working class implantation of the CP was due to its successful trade union work, it experience tremendous growth in Harlem in the 1930s making it the most multiracial socialist organization with a mass base in US history.

We need to recognize that the CP was operating in radically different context. Even in the 1920s, when the organization had only a handful of black members, it operated within a left milieu in Harlem much stronger than what exists in today’s black and Latino neighborhoods. Although the tide of the mass Garvey movement had receded, the CP still had to compete for soapbox space on 135<sup>th</sup> street with nationalist political agitators. Their early black recruits were left-wing black nationalists disillusioned with the Garvey movement.

Furthermore, although the CP in the 20’s was small, it could still bring to bear significant resources to Harlem organizing, and was approximately 10 times the size of our organization when the national population was much smaller. Much of the membership of the organization were part of language federations rooted in ethnic neighborhoods adjacent to Harlem, which could provide meeting space, organizers and other resources. And the CP could call on literally thousands of white communists from around NYC to join rallies in defense of the Scottsboro boys or in defense of free speech, which helped give material evidence that Black/white working class unity was possible.

Despite these differences, we can learn some important lessons from the structure of local Communist organizations:

Although the CP did have very successful trade union work, its factory shop nuclei were not a massive success in and of themselves. Introduced in 1925 by the Zinovievist “Bolshevization” campaign as a way of limiting the influence of the language federations, the shop units were, by most accounts, never particularly successful.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 193.

Secondly, communists were organized throughout the early thirties into neighborhood units of 10-20 members, relatively small sections with a 3 person leadership (unit leader, agitation organizer, and financial secretary).<sup>2</sup> The move to looser neighborhood branches did not occur until the Popular front period.

Finally, it was really the CP's mass work around the Scottsboro case, unemployment and relief, and tenant organizing that led to its gaining respect and the ability to recruit in Harlem.

Again, organizing around strategically chosen particular issues that came out of the felt needs of people in particular neighborhoods led to greater implantation and laid the basis for organizational growth.

### **Applications to Today**

The historical lessons drawn from high points in struggle in the thirties and sixties cannot be directly applied to our organization. The methods used by much larger groups of socialists and radicals are necessarily different. We are in the beginning stages of the "molecular accumulation of cadre," analogous to the positions of radicals in the late 1920s or late 1950s.

Furthermore, there is also tremendous unevenness within our organization as to what place we are at in different cities and communities. Some branches have a handful of comrades in a large urban area, while other districts have enough cadre to field multiple branches in a variety of neighborhoods.

However, given continued crisis and deepening radicalization, and increasing but uneven political activity outlined in our political perspectives, we need to find a way to increase size and our implantation in working class

It seems to me that the goals of branches rooted in neighborhoods should be to create some kind of implantation in local communities and struggles. The goal of sinking roots should go along with working to develop the left locally, as well as winning contacts to revolutionary politics. That leads to a few, tentative recommendations for community branches.

We need to plan and carefully assess how to implant ourselves in movement work based in neighborhoods. This may be categorically different than much of the movement activity we are used to participating in, which involves organizing fractions around episodic movements that arise and then disappear. Instead, we should focus on movements that have long term potential and address systemic and entrenched issues in particular neighborhoods.

Brian C. is absolutely right that we need to begin with a concrete analysis of the structure and particularities of any particular city in which we want to organize. His emphasis on finding centers production and realization of surplus value is misplaced, however. Our growth and implantation at this point are likely occur in places that are tangential to the realization of surplus value locally (as are the two places that his branch has related to – a hospital and hotel).

Furthermore, we are more likely grow out of local movements than out of direct workplace agitation and propaganda (although Brian is correct that we do need to carefully and systematically develop workplace sales and relationships).

In order to do so, we need to carefully to find issues, like gentrification, closing of public services, or police harassment and brutality, which are likely to be ongoing and continual areas of activity. These are areas of work, like the Unemployed Councils or tenants organizations of the early 30s, that can help involve larger numbers of workers in ongoing activity, in advance of a period of workplace struggle.

Branches will need to pick and choose. This does not mean ignoring movements that explode but have less staying power, but rather to carefully prioritize resources and try to retain branch focus on a particular area of work.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, 97.

It is essential that we work with smaller branches. While a concentration of cadre into large branches makes managing logistical operations easier, it makes it harder to ensure that everyone in the branch has a meaningful role in moving the organization forward.

In some places, we do so out of necessity rather than choice, but in others, we should consider splitting branches that are too large to really give all members key role in building the organization. We can form branches that are more focused on specific neighborhoods and the particular issues and populations that live there.

In New York, we have concentrated our members into larger branches as a way of allowing much of our long-term cadre to be involved in implantation work inside movements (and are thus relatively less involved in life of the branch).

Instead, we should experiment with movement-based branches, where we have sufficient cadre that are all involved in a single movement. Rather than having to try to bring the movement to the branch, we bring the branch to the movement. For example, the 15 teachers in New York City could operate as a branch that continued to have discussions and meetings that were not at all limited to education or trade union activity, but instead helped to bring in broader political topics. The branch would be more relevant to our teacher contacts and provide an easier and more organic reason to get involved in the ISO. In a large district, such a branch could be formed simultaneously with branches tightly focused on implantation in neighborhoods.

Our structure in this period should involve a high degree of experimentation. Rather than trying the same thing in many different cities (or in different parts of the same multi-branch district), we should try a number of different approaches. Some branches might find success in trying to build a “political hub,” if there is a large milieu of radicalizing younger activists (more similar to a campus environment). But in most neighborhoods, activity would focus around one or two movement areas of work, with a goal of establishing relationships with existing activists and coalitions, raising the level of activity and politics in neighborhoods, and recruiting both established activists and newcomers to revolutionary politics. Still other comrades might be involved in a movement branch, if there was ongoing, sustainable movement with sufficient momentum.

In summary, we should learn the lessons of successful left wing community organizing in US history: that building around the specific needs and demands of particular communities and neighborhoods can lead to greater implantation and growth for revolutionary politics. This does not mean that we should replicate the absence of class politics of the Alinskian or Maoist models, or abandon the idea that the workplace being the center of working class power.

It does requires building smaller and more flexible branches that give a role to every member, that experiment with different models and that occasionally might be based entirely around a single movement.

I hope that this contribution can lead to a deeper debate and further theorization of the role of our local non-campus organizations.

**-Peter L., New York City**

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## **Towards a More Productive Mode of Discussion and Debate**

The past few months have seen a chorus of similar criticisms of the ISO from current and former members, one of the most common elements of which is the ISO’s alleged lack of internal democracy. The general impression one gets from reading these documents is that independent thought, freedom of discussion, and democracy are nonexistent within the ISO, which is a preposterous claim. There exist both formal and informal mechanisms for ISO members to express their views, make proposals, debate positions, and influence the direction and decisions of the organization, and most of the time these mechanisms function effectively. But within this generally healthy picture there is a recurring trend, which is not the norm but which is also frequent enough to be more than just isolated or random cases, of defensive over-reaction to

criticism or alternate viewpoints. In this document, I will first outline what I see as the most productive way of going about having internal debates, then I will look at an example from several years ago that illustrates the problems that occasionally occur in our internal discussions of controversial issues, and finally I will look at the mode of discussion that has unfolded on both sides of the debate over the ISO Renewal Faction, the Socialist Outpost letter, and the Counterpunch article.

In general, our method in responding to internal debate should never or almost never be that of blanket refutation, whereby a comrade singles out the points they disagree with in a document in order to dismiss the document as a whole. Rather, the method should be that of sorting out the wheat from the chaff, identifying the kernels of insight and the valid issues raised and discarding the arguments that the responding comrade feels to be in error. This accomplishes two things:

- It creates an atmosphere that leans more towards collaboration than strife. It positions the contending members as comrades working towards a shared goal who disagree on how to achieve it rather than as fundamentally opposed rivals.
- It is a more effective means of advancing our internal political understanding and method. The blanket refutation freezes the two sides of the argument, locking them into defensive postures and preventing them from recognizing the validity of any of their opponents' points. What is necessary is for the two sides to use each other's arguments to spur them to refine and advance their own positions; the blanket refutation short-circuits this dialectical process of engagement and evolution.

I am not saying that the blanket refutation is the typical mode of argument used in the ISO, or that the wheat-and-chaff mode is never used. One can imagine arguments as existing on a spectrum between these two extremes, with most arguments falling somewhere between them. My point here is that we should almost always be employing something much closer to the wheat-and-chaff side of the spectrum than the blanket refutation side, which I think is currently not the case. The dangers of the blanket refutation are increased when it is accompanied with a dismissiveness or hostility from leading members towards new, developing, or less senior members, as it sometimes (but not always) is.<sup>3</sup> I want to make it clear, however, that while I view the use of the blanket refutation as a weakness of our method of internal discussion, I do not regard it as a "crisis," as do the members of the ISO Renewal Faction, Socialist Outpost, and the authors of the Counterpunch article. It is a problem, but it is one that occurs within many organizations on the left, and I would argue that the ISO's internal democracy compares favorably with that of most other groups on the left.

As an example of the use of the blanket refutation accompanied by dismissiveness and hostility, I want to take the response in the New York City district to the 2010 pre-convention document submitted by Akua G., Hector A. and Emmanuel S., "Recruiting, Developing, and Retaining Members of Color in the ISO," which discussed the ISO's anti-racist activism and recruitment and training of members of color. The NYC District Committee (DC) responded with a document that not only refuted what it saw as the errors of the original document but chastised Akua, Hector and Emmanuel for having slandered the ISO's commitment to anti-racism. Similar charges were leveled against Akua, Hector and Emmanuel in the district's pre-convention discussion. DC was correct in identifying a number of weak, misleading and inaccurate statements and arguments in the original document, but (as members of DC later acknowledged) the DC document was uncomradely and hostile (which the original document had not been, in my view), and the DC response threw the baby out with the bathwater. As Aaron A., a member of the NYC district, wrote in 2010:

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<sup>3</sup> As I use the term here, "leaders" include the elected members of national leadership bodies, paid staff organizers, elected branch leaders, and longstanding ISO members who are highly respected and have extensive informal influence. For the record, I think the ISO's leaders on the whole do a very good job and I do not share Shaun J.'s view that it is the job of cadre to always be in opposition to national leadership. However, I do feel that there are a few bad habits that can be found in both the ISO's leadership and in the groups that have recently come forward to critique the leadership, which I would like to see both sides put behind them.

I believe the way the discussion unfolded around the document was one-sided, as a result coming across as overly harsh, and failed to address what were the underlying concerns of the document. I think, as a result, many comrades felt unwilling to express their thoughts on the issue, both substantively and in our approach to it...the strength of the [District Committee's] response tended to not address what I think were the expression of real frustrations and impatience, by a number of comrades of colour viz. their own development, the pace of struggle and recruitment, and a lack of understanding of our history.<sup>4</sup>

The original document made its share of mistakes, but it identified a sense of something lacking in the ISO's approach to race and racism—was a good and necessary one, which was acknowledged by the decision at the ISO's 2012 convention to renew and augment the ISO's focus on these issues at a national level. Akua, Hector and Emmanuel's document may have been flawed in its particulars, but there was an underlying core to it that was valuable and useful, and which was disregarded in the rush to dismiss it.

Jump ahead to 2013. In the wake of Sharon S's reevaluation of intersectionality, NYC DC members took a look back at their response to Akua, Hector and Emmanuel's document, regretted the harshness of their response, and took the correct and admirable step of issuing an apology and modulating their earlier views. Although I'm not in the NYC district any longer (which I was a member of in 2010) and therefore don't want to comment on the specifics of a discussion that I don't have first-hand knowledge of, it appears that there has been a vigorous backlash against DC's handling of the document in 2010, and that this backlash may have gone too far in demanding retaliation for the mistakes of 2010. This repeats the pattern that we have seen nationally of comrades responding to a narrow and hostile response from ISO leaders by exaggerating their own criticisms, resulting in a polarization of both sides that degenerates from what could have been a productive discussion and debate into a mud-slinging match.

This incident is just one example of a defensive over-reaction to a document, question or discussion that was flawed but that was asking important questions. In a 2013 document written for the NYC district bulletin, Aaron A. connected the handling of Akua, Hector and Emmanuel's document to a larger pattern in the ISO's internal discussions:

Insofar as the egregious political errors (bound up with the 2010 document) are, in fact, a manifestation of a faulty political method of operation, i.e. a top-down manner of conducting "arguments", it is one that was - for better or worse - not at all unique to this incident. Most every long-standing comrade has had the experience of being 'handled', of being the subject of political pressure where the line between constructively moving forward an open political debate, and sidelining an argument and ensuring a political debate does not get further aired, is at best, extremely blurred.

I want to point out that I am not equating the validity of all the documents under discussion here. Rather, I'm arguing that they all appear to be part of a similar pattern of mutual exaggeration and hostility that lowers the level of debate, whatever that original level might have been, and that whatever their level of validity, we need to employ a wheat-and-chaff approach to them, recognizing whatever they may have of value and contesting or discarding the rest. The documents that Paul L. has submitted are excellent examples of this more positive approach.<sup>5</sup>

To return to the current pre-convention period, I believe that the documents by Paul D. and SC belong to this recurring pattern. Both make legitimate criticisms of Shaun J. and the ISO Renewal Faction, respectively, but do so in a generally hostile and defensive way that ignores the legitimate questions and concerns being expressed by the targets of their criticism. The critiques of the ISO exaggerate the problems of our organization, while the leadership ignores them. As Avery W. has written:

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<sup>4</sup> I unfortunately do not have a copy of the original 2010 document this is excerpted from, but Aaron quoted his own earlier document in a 2013 document he wrote for the NYC district bulletin.

<sup>5</sup> Paul L., "Revolutionary strategy and the ISO: Response to 'A Critique'," Pre-convention Bulletin #2, and "Theory and practice in the ISO: Critical notes on a public polemic," Pre-convention Bulletin #4.

The Renewal Faction attempt to address these concerns [relating to internal democracy] of fundamental perspective, and have been among the first to do so. For that reason, the conclusion in the Steering Committee's document on the Faction that it attempts to 'test' and 'provoke', rather than engage an honest debate, seems hasty. ... While I agree with the Steering Committee's other critiques, I think that a constructive approach to the Faction's challenge should start with the assumption that any of its errors reflect first a desire to engage with urgently necessary debates, and second our collective lack of experience with dissident internal organizing.<sup>6</sup>

A similar view was expressed in the Socialist Outpost letter, which I think is basically correct: "Not all disagreements with the leadership are anti-leadership or anti-Leninist. By exaggerating the scale of critiques the leadership itself runs the risk of escalating debates about organization, theory and perspectives into existential questions—that the leadership is "under siege," etc.—when in fact no such existential threat exists."<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that I agree with all of Socialist Outpost's claims, many of which are exaggerated, some wildly. (The ISO's critics could be ranked in an ascending order of exaggeration, from the ISO Renewal Faction to the Socialist Outpost to the Counterpunch article.) But when responding to criticisms, whether internal or external, we have to be able to recognize when our critics make legitimate points as well as when they get things wrong; the failure to do so is dogmatism and saps the credibility of those making the refutations.

Avery W. has also provided in an earlier document a critique of aspects of our internal democratic practices that is more nuanced and constructive than any of the other critiques so far offered.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the problems that Avery points to are ones of informal routines rather than formal structures. To gain a full picture of the true health of the ISO's internal democracy, we have to pay attention not just to formal routines but to how feedback is solicited from the rank and file and how questions, criticisms and alternate views are received by the group's leadership and high-level cadre.

To go back to SC's response to the recent criticisms, I want to take a look at Paul D.'s response to Shaun J. I'm aware that recently Shaun J. has made a series of increasingly disturbing allegations and arguments online, which I do not support, but at the same time I feel that this does not eliminate the need for a more nuanced response to his arguments, in part because any response to Shaun J. will also have a collateral impact on other people making similar arguments who may not share any responsibility for Shaun's more problematic actions and statements. We have to be careful that in contesting Shaun (or any other critic of the ISO) that we don't "bend the stick" too far, lumping all of the ISO critic's, both internal and external, hostile, friendly and in between, into a single category.

Paul argues correctly against Shaun's apparent view that cadre must always be "contradictory to the leadership,"<sup>9</sup> but in so doing Paul dismisses the possibility that there is value or legitimacy in any of Shaun's arguments. Paul D. argues that Shaun was allowed to have his say, pointing out that he wrote a large number of documents at last year's convention (and at previous ones as well). Paul alleges that Shaun merely wishes to have his views accepted without argument and that he is upset at his failure to convince more members of his views. First, this strikes me as a rather petty line of argument that glosses over more serious issues. While it's true that Shaun had and other members have access to pre-convention (and now internal) bulletins to make their views known, which is of course a necessity for internal democracy, this does not mean that the ISO's formal rules and informal culture of internal discussion is entirely healthy. As Shaun writes, "To be clear, it's not that the cadre doesn't have criticisms of the leadership; it's that these criticisms are rarely expressed through the 'public use of reason.' Cadre can be brutally, hair-raisingly critical of the leadership...at the pub, at a party, in private correspondence. Yet this only 'gets out' by way

<sup>6</sup> Avery W., "Is the ISO a failed political project?," Pre-convention Bulletin #7.

<sup>7</sup> Adam T., Bob Q., Hector R., Loretta C., Rossana R., Saman S., and Sophie H., "A Letter to Comrades in the International Socialist Organization," <http://www.socialistoutpost.com/blog/2013/10/9/a-letter-to-comrades-in-the-international-socialist-organization-iso>.

<sup>8</sup> Avery W., "For a structure and culture of frank criticism," Pre-convention Bulletin #4.

<sup>9</sup> Paul D., "Theory, cadre, and continuity: Building revolutionary organization today," Pre-convention Bulletin #5.

of exception.”<sup>10</sup> I agree, based on personal experience and conversations with other members, that the fear of being not merely disagreed with, but harangued and made to feel insubordinate for voicing a dissident opinion, is something that occurs in the ISO more often than it ought to—not always, but more often than it should.

SC’s document similarly makes a number of valid points about the Renewal Faction, including that their effort to reinstate Shaun J bypasses the ISO’s internal processes and that the decision to form a faction implies an escalation of the debate into a struggle for control of the organization.<sup>11</sup> The first decision does an end-run around the ISO’s internal rules at a time when what is needed is internal discussion and debate rather than last-ditch tactics such as insubordination of the organization’s rules, while the second similarly escalates the level of internal struggle at a time when it is not called for. That said, as Avery has pointed out, the latter effect may not have been their intent, and may rather have been a result of our lack of familiarity with the process of forming official opposition groups, including the differences between forming an internal tendency and an internal faction.

Given that the ISO has relatively little experience with internal factions and tendencies, we have to allow for a certain amount of mistakes on all sides, and rather than slinging mud at each other do our best to correct them. In recent years we have reevaluated a number of long-standing views and practices of the ISO, which is bound to produce a certain amount of internal controversy, but this is a healthy process that we have to work through, not attempt to shut down and close off. Further, when members feel that their voices are being dismissed—not merely disagreed with, but written off and marginalized—then it’s only natural that they become embittered to one degree or another, and that when these bottled-up grievances are released, they take on an exaggerated, hyperbolic character. This is another reason that a certain amount of leeway should be allowed to members who are attempting to make what they see as constructive criticisms of the ISO. This does not mean that the leadership or anyone else should hold back from arguing against positions that they see as mistaken, only that everyone should strive to give each other’s intentions the benefit of the doubt and to look for the kernels of truth that may be contained within the husks of others’ (and their own) arguments. We also have to take care to deal with the specific merits of individual critiques rather than lumping all of them into a single category. This can be difficult to do when the critics explicitly identify with each other, and it is valid to address the shared elements of their arguments together, but at the same time we have to do our best to disentangle their critiques to the extent that they differ from each other.

I suggested above that the critiques of the ISO Renewal Faction, Socialist Outpost, and the Counterpunch article may have a grain of truth to them beneath the hyperbole. Regarding the Renewal Faction, I don’t believe that their proposals for the direction of the ISO are adequate to deal with the actual challenges we face, or even that they add up to a fully coherent program, but I do see them as having initiated a discussion, however ham-handedly, that we need to be having. I see their critiques as being rooted, at least in part, in the observation of real dilemmas or problems that have been blown up to varying degrees of exaggeration, which have been displaced in various ways. Their critique of the leadership’s perspectives, for instance, is a displacement of a recognition of the lack of a full theorization of the impact of the 35-year ruling-class offensive on the condition of the working class (a topic that is the subject of a separate pre-convention document I’m working on). Likewise, I see the various changes to ISO rules that they have proposed as a displacement from the hard-to-define realm of internal culture and modes of debate onto the more easily grasped and readily altered formal structures of the organization.

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<sup>10</sup> Shaun J., “Valences of the united front (III): The struggle for culture,”

<http://torepeat.wordpress.com/2013/10/19/valences-of-the-united-front-iii-the-struggle-for-culture/>.

<sup>11</sup> The SC’s document also contains one brief argument that deserves to be rejected. They criticize the faction for being “created secretly, that is, without the knowledge of most ISO members, as well as its leadership, and only ‘unveiled’ with the uploading of the web site.” They complain both that the faction was created in secret and that it was made public via a web site. Regarding the first point, of course the faction was “secret” before it was announced. The faction’s organizers naturally had to go about writing their statements, corresponding with each other, seeking out like-minded comrades, and so on, before they could announce themselves, but they did so promptly and openly. If factions are to be allowed, which they are under ISO rules, then there has to be a period before factions are officially announced when incipient factions are organized. The SC’s objection to this is sectarian and paranoid.

While I believe that some of these rule changes represent potentially useful steps, I don't see these or any other concrete proposals as the key steps forward for the organization. Rather, I believe that what is necessary is an ongoing process of refinement and evolution of our political analysis, internal culture, and informal routines, none of which can be effectively legislated through bureaucratic proposals. What is needed is for all members of the ISO to be more conscious of the environment of discussion they are creating when they make arguments directed at other members of the organization. It's important not to overestimate the problems with the ISO's culture of internal democracy, but it's also important not to dismiss them. Our culture of internal democracy is mostly healthy most of the time, but we shouldn't be satisfied with mostly healthy; any formal rules or informal practices that inhibit the real functioning of our internal democracy need to be identified and overcome.<sup>12</sup>

-Doug S., Boulder

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## **San Diego's Struggle with Gender Parity and the Formation of a Women and Trans\* Caucus**

2013 has shifted the question of gender and socialism to the forefront of ISO discussion. Internationally, the failures of the SWP have rocked the left. Nationally, the ISO is adjusting its approach to the broader left on the issues of gendered oppression. In San Diego we had the allegation of sexual misconduct by a longstanding member (to be discussed in full in other document) and some missteps around relating to our first self-identified trans\* members.

While it would be ridiculous to say that these events played no role in what is described below, it is important to realize that problems addressed in this document have existed in our branch for years. This document is by no mean prescriptive, but we hope that by sharing this experience, other branches can take a proactive approach to fighting the effects of oppression within a branch.

### **BACKGROUND**

In San Diego, since around 2007 our branch has been overwhelmingly made up of cisgender men. The formal and informal leadership has been made of cisgender men with a few rare exceptions. The question of why aren't there more women in the branch has concerned us all for a long time but we largely attributed the disparity to objective forces and bad luck.

Previous to December, when faced with scenarios where we suspected sexism may have played a part in branch dynamics, we often dismissed them in the following ways:

1. She isn't won to the project of building the ISO

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<sup>12</sup> I'm putting this in a footnote because it's secondary to my main argument, but is still a point worth making. It regards the use of the internet, especially Facebook, for internal discussion, which has been subject to a defensive over-reaction bordering on paranoia. We have frequently seen members chastised for airing internal debates online, with the ISO's rules and the need for security invoked as justifications for this chastisement. The perceived need for security is especially pernicious because it is almost never accompanied with an explanation of what danger is entailed by the supposed security risk. I would argue that while there are a handful of documents that contain sensitive information, the vast majority of the documents contained in the pre-convention and internal bulletins pose no serious security risk to the ISO. ISO rules state that these documents should not be shared with non-members, which should be respected as all official rules of the ISO should be, but that rule does not extend to the prohibition of any discussion of the issues raised by internal documents online. Further, I think it is damaging to the organization to close off internal discussions that don't pose any legitimate security risk. We should strive to hold as many of our internal discussions as possible in the open, and invite non-members to participate in them; for this reason I support Brian L.'s proposal to change the members-only restriction on pre-convention documents and discussions. Our willingness to discuss our organizational approaches openly will be attractive to the vast majority of people around us and will help draw them towards the ISO. It will also undoubtedly attract many critics, but this is not something that we should shy away from. In our activist and propaganda work we always welcome the opportunity to debate our views openly with our critics, and our organizational politics should be no exception to this.

2. This is a misunderstanding between two individuals and they need some kind of mediation.
3. I know that person is an anti-sexist who fights for a world without oppression so I don't want to be too hard on him.
4. That person is really tough on everyone. That's just his personality.
5. In the past I've seen that person support x issue, x person, really listen etc. So this is just an anomaly.
6. Maybe this is just a problem that I'm having.
7. I'm concerned about this. But how can I be sure its a problem of sexism if its just me and one other person who suspect and aren't even sure there's a problem.
8. We used to have a pretty large and strong female membership. We're not really doing anything much differently than we used to.
9. Perhaps objective conditions like women bearing the brunt of the economic collapse are at play.
10. At convention, when visiting other branches or reading SW it is clear that this organization practices affirmative action and does what it can to promote leadership among women.

Yet, in December of 2013, we found in ourselves in a situation where all the women who had been part of the branch for more than 2 years had quit, were thinking of leaving the branch, or were moving to another city within the year for work or school. This would leave only 2 women in a branch of approximately 20.

There are many individual stories that could be related but when we began to compare notes on a one-on-one basis we realized that there were common feelings and frustrations that led to alienation or marginalization. The rousing chorus from almost all of our women was "I don't feel like I'm being taken seriously."

This had been echoed in the past by our one trans\* member of 2 years. They had been assigned female at birth and felt that many in the branch related to them as a woman.

### **TAKING THE LEAP**

In mid-December we announced that there would be a meeting of only the women and trans\* members of the organization. The goal of the meeting going in was to hear each others concerns and experiences and determine if there was a problem that could be identified, how widespread it was and what could be done about it. All 7 women and trans\* members were present and wrote the following joint statement which was presented at a special branch meeting held a few days later:

### **JOINT STATEMENT**

This meeting has been called because several of the women and transgender people in the branch have experienced sexism and transphobia during and outside meetings and actions. In discussion with former and current members, we noticed similar patterns appear with both individuals and within the general group. It's clear now that if we don't radically address the issue of the gendered oppression within the branch, these negative conditions and patterns will isolate and push out all the women and transgender members overtime.

The oppression felt by the collective members is not always apparent, nor do members call attention to the experiences directly, but the need for support and understanding is compelling us to shed light on these issues. The oppressive behavior is not inherent in every man in the branch and have vocalized full support for our cause tonight. However, because there are some men in this branch that have caused all the women and transgender people to feel oppressed in some way, we must move forward together in solidarity.

People who seek a world without oppression will slip up occasionally, but these damaging incidents and behaviors have occurred numerous times without confrontation. Because an ally does not experience the oppression directly they cannot know exactly how their actions are affecting others. These continuing experiences have eroded our confidence in saying the branch is anti-sexist.

Tonight we ask that you listen to each person and reflect on your behavior and language used toward women and transgender people. We ask that before you become defensive that you hear what we are saying. We would not call this meeting if we didn't see this as an extremely concerning issue regarding the future of this branch.

This has not been an easy issue for us to bring up. We don't take this confrontation lightly and we don't wish to cause a rift between the different genders within the branch. We hope everyone leaves this meeting with an understanding that we all want to move forward collectively and that we are not seeking to isolate particular individuals, nor continue our silence if we see oppression within the branch.

All of us agree that the following behaviors are problematic generally, but have a more extreme effect on the women and trans\* people who are involved in or connected to the branch:

### **General problems**

1. Interrupted and talked-over in discussions outside meetings with fellow comrades.
2. Ignored while others take in one-on-one or small conversations.
3. Dismissed as emotional.
4. Dismissed as too new to the ISO in a debates while the men members who have been around just as long are given more consideration.
5. Men are treated as cadre more readily than women or trans\*
6. Unnecessary, patronizing clarification of statements or opinions during meetings (i.e. "What X was trying to say was...")
7. Not feeling like we're being taken seriously as individuals
8. Observing overall defensiveness in response to voiced concerns about sexist issues existing within the branch.
9. Evidence of a newer female member being opposed for a BC slate because she "lacked experience" when members had full knowledge of electing a man member to the BC whom had only been a part of the branch for a few months.
10. Being treated as a statistic, "We need more women" as opposed to "We need to figure out how to make the branch a place where women are empowered"
11. Discussions around oppression ignored or glossed over interpersonal situations not involving partners

### **Problems in meetings**

- Inconsiderate or outlandish critiques directed at other members after stating an opinion leads to fear of being attacked or criticized in meetings.
- Coercion into speaking in meeting (Example: We still haven't heard from any women. Would any women like to speak up?) This highlights the oppressed and adds pressure on those that have a hard enough time expressing their opinions.
- Men jumping on stack without giving consideration for those that might need a moment to contemplate thoughts, or translate the preceding discussion.
- Men repeat statements and opinions of women and trans\* members without realizing they have done so.
- Lack of seriousness when introducing PGP. (i.e. "I go by he or him, but it's whatever") or not continuing the practice at all due to familiarity.
- Disapproving and dismissive body language in meetings (eye roll, head shaking, arms folded)

**What is to Be Done?**

- Wait a few beats before speaking during discussions. Silence should be embraced at the beginning to allow contemplation or translation, if needed.
- Be aware of how often you've spoken during a discussion. Allow a few others to speak before you jump on stack again.
- Foster an environment that allows people to address issues as they happen. Defensive reactions deter conversations and solutions from happening.
- Men should check themselves and their competitive attitudes
- Everyone should do their best to engage those that haven't spoken in a comradely way. (i.e. mention an experience you've had with another comrade, or reach out on an issue you might share common knowledge about.)

Then each of us had an opportunity to say why we personally felt it was important that the meeting happen or relate individual concerns.

The number one concern for the women and trans\* meeting going into the meeting was that we'd be met with defensiveness from the members who are men. Conversely the others were worried that the meeting would be decisive, accusatory or humiliating. Frankly, the meeting could have been a disaster. But, because the meeting was supported by the branch committee and all present were truly interested in making our branch a safe space for all, people were ready to listen and share in the most compassionate way possible. It would not be an exaggeration to say it was transformative.

**OUTCOMES**

The most observable impact of this process has been in our meeting format and introductions. We're using small group discussions as the primary meeting structure reserving full branch discussion for situations where each member needs to hear what each member thinks on a topic. We've also developed a script for meetings to ensure proper attention is paid to preferred gender pronouns and gender balance.

As our meetings are held less than 20 minutes from the US-Mexico border, the issue of Spanish language inclusion began to reemerge as a branch concern. We've established a Spanish-speaking study group. We have taken steps to ensure that those that require translation get it and are figuring out if it is possible to have meetings that are primarily in Spanish.

Those who participated in the original women and trans\* meeting felt the need to continue the caucus and for the time being it is still closed to cisgender men. It remains to be seen what the exact tasks of the caucus will be. Possibilities include further recommendations for branch improvements, establishment of separate study groups on general topics, development of branch study groups about oppression and/or creating mentorship/buddy systems for new women and trans members or contacts. What is clear is that there was a huge need to speak in a space where they can be open and honest about the issues related to gender.

**CONCLUSION**

There's no way to know for sure how the events of the last month will affect the gender distribution in the San Diego branch in the long term. Those of us inside the caucus have broken the logjam of isolated frustration and depression in favor of collective problem-solving. More importantly, in the month since our emergency meeting, those outside the caucus have made a serious effort to eliminate behaviors that are dismissive or overly aggressive. By establishing some understandings about the way our culture trains us to behave, we now hopefully have the basis to build a branch with greater gender parity.

--Zakiya K., Selena M., Norma V., San Diego

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## Assessing the 2013 General Disciplinary Procedures

### Purpose of the Assessment

The purpose of this document is to assess the General Disciplinary Procedures our organization has been using since April 2013. Since the new guidelines have not yet arrived, I am going to assess the current guidelines fully aware that the Rules commission is working diligently on a new version.

My motivation for writing this document is well-reflected by a quote from the Steering Committee's Perspectives document in PCB-1: "It's better to have made a concrete judgment about the organization's next steps (rather than vague, conclusion-less generalizations) and find out they're lacking in some way and have to adjust. That means the organization will be trained to be forward-thinking and confident." The context of the quote is different but I think the sentiment applies: our organization made a concrete judgment about the ISO's next steps by creating a Code of Conduct and a specific Disciplinary and Appeals process. I think it's important that we have an ongoing assessment of these developments to see where they need to be adjusted when put into practice. This document contains an assessment and some questions, but it doesn't contain resolutions. Before throwing resolutions at the Convention, I'd like to present my thoughts, get feedback, and prompt others to consider the variety of challenges our organization faces in terms of dealing with misconduct.

A number of the challenges I'm about to outline would be faced by any revolutionary organization attempting to develop a principled approach to issues of misconduct. I think the Steering Committee and the Rules commission have created a thoughtful set of rules that represent our organization's good faith effort to deal with very complex issues. However, in practice, the Guidelines have proved difficult to navigate so far. There are two particular categories of difficulty I'd like to address: (1) Guideline policies that can create procedural dilemmas; and (2) services offered by the Guidelines that most comrades are unprepared/untrained to implement.

### Problems in Practice

#### Example A.

It is currently possible for a comrade to be indefinitely suspended following an accusation if the accuser chooses not to engage with our disciplinary process.

This occurs due to the potential conflict of two rules within the guidelines:

Rule A:

"In the event of a serious accusation – such as one alleging an act of violence, sexual assault or robbery – the respondent is to be suspended for the duration of the investigation/hearing process... without assumption of guilt, due to the very serious nature of such accusations."

and

Rule B:

"The complainant will be required to sign a statement verifying that he/she wrote the complainant's Statement."

At face value, these rules make a lot of sense. However, in practice, this means if a branch becomes aware of serious allegations against a member, and the person making those allegations chooses not to participate in our disciplinary process, then we either have a comrade who is indefinitely suspended or a comrade who stays a member without the accusation being resolved. No one can submit a complaint on behalf of the

complainant.

So why would a complainant make an allegation but not choose to pursue a case against her alleged attacker? (I'm going to go with he/she gendering, but of course any gender configuration is possible.) Here is my educated guess:

If a politically serious ISO comrade was sexually assaulted by another comrade, it is reasonable to assume that she might find the courage to submit a written complaint outlining the physically intimate and traumatic details of her sexual assault. It is reasonable to imagine that she would allow herself to be questioned by investigators about intimate details. It is reasonable to imagine that she would subject herself to a third repetition of the trauma during a hearing committee created to evaluate the merit of her claim. Committed to our project, it makes perfect sense why an ISO member would choose to go through our full complaints process.

But I don't think we can assume that someone who is not a member of the ISO, who is not committed to our political project, who may not even know much about us, would wish to submit a written allegation of sexual assault containing highly intimate details to a nationwide committee of strangers. Even if the non-member were motivated to write a formal complaint to our organization, I see little reason why a non-member would agree to being questioned by untrained investigators. It seems even less likely that a nonmember would assent to a second round of intimate questioning by a hearing committee created to judge whether or not her claim has merit. The bottom line is that someone outside our organization has little reason to engage with our internal disciplinary process and has significant emotional incentive to avoid it.

#### Example B

The Guidelines make it very clear that once a formal complaint is submitted, even if the complainant abandons the process, the national Disciplinary Committee (hereafter NDC) is empowered to continue investigating. This sounds very good, but the NDC is bound to resolve cases based on the preponderance of evidence. From what I understand, it has been ruled that statements collected from complainants/respondents do not constitute evidence.\* Unless there are very unusual circumstances for a sexual assault (a direct witness, the respondent brags about the assault, etc.) it would be extremely difficult for the Committee to rule that a preponderance of evidence has been established without the complainant's participation. Even more problematic, in many cases it would prove difficult for a complainant to produce a preponderance of evidence even if participating.

"Preponderance of Evidence" means a claimant only has to have weightier evidence than the respondent. This less stringent criteria favors complainants. However, it is notoriously difficult to establish evidence in cases of sexual assault--especially in cases where the perpetrator/victim know one another. Requiring a rape kit is not acceptable. There are myriad reasons why women don't go to the emergency room for a rape kit after being sexually assaulted. But more critically, rape kits test for DNA evidence and most nonstranger assaults hinge on the issue of consent, not DNA.

There is also no reason to assume a sexual assault will produce visible injuries as evidence. Simply put: the criteria for rape is not physical injury. The criteria is having sex with someone against their wishes. And it is very difficult for a person to produce evidence about what they didn't wish at a particular moment. Moreover, attacks may be reported days, weeks, months, or years after an assault; trauma produces gaps and distortions in survivors' memories and narratives. It is not considered acceptable to judge a complainant or respondent by their reaction to investigative proceedings, (i.e. complainants who behave unreliably aren't more likely to be lying; respondents who argue persuasively for their innocence aren't more likely to be telling the truth [see citation at end of document for details]). Hearsay evidence is not permitted in our Guidelines. Inquiries into the character of a complainant/respondent are not permitted and witnesses' comments about character are also not accepted as evidence.

In other words, the evidence considered acceptable by the Guidelines is quite limited. *This limiting may be very important to ensure due process for respondents.* But regardless, the outcome is that claimants who

allege non-stranger assault will have a hard time establishing a preponderance of evidence.

Lastly, the NDC does not rule that a comrade is "guilty" or "not guilty"; we only rule on whether a preponderance of evidence was or wasn't established. Respondents will not be 'cleared'. Some comrades may have a hard time accepting that we cannot assure them an accused member is innocent.

I know that comrades have been doing research into transformative justice methods. This may be a solution, but I have two questions about these methods: (1) What do we do when a respondent insists they are unjustly accused? (2) If a respondent admits to a crime, can our process be used by the state to convict them?

### **Personnel Issues**

Issue 1: Which committees are required to follow the Guidelines?

The Guidelines specify that certain rules are to be carried out by the NDC, the SC, and branch/district committees. The 2013-elected Disciplinary Committee has been required to follow the Guidelines to the letter. Will branch committees also be required to follow the Guidelines in the same manner? I ask for two reasons:

- a) It involves substantial time and training commitments.
- b) What happens if a branch feels the Guidelines don't make sense in their situation?

I raise this because my own branch had a sexual misconduct case this year. The complainant was not required to file a formal statement; there was no hearing. BC members I spoke with (I was not on BC at the time) were opposed to those requirements. An expulsion was decided because (a) the branch felt it had a political commitment to believe women, and (b) the BC felt the complainant's narrative was compelling. Other branch members accepted the outcome of this case without incident.

Moreover, Texans banned a contact during Socialism2012 because two women complained to cadre that he approached them in a sexually inappropriate manner. The methods used by Texas comrades would not follow the current Guidelines had the contact signed a red card because the decision was based on a character assessment— everyone thought the guy was a total creep. Also, the accusers would not have had evidence to support their claims. Had this person signed a card, I do not believe it would've been a good use of our resources to provide him with a disciplinary process.

Issue 2: Providing Emergency Services

"Both the complainant and respondent must be counseled and supported if they need services for any trauma they are experiencing due to the incident and the disciplinary investigation as it begins and progresses."... "our priority is assisting the complainant in securing...rape and/or other counseling, and immediate medical assistance."

I am proud to belong to an organization that has the commitments mentioned in the above quote. However, this claim needs to be concretized. Will a protocol be developed to help comrades navigate emergency medical services for a complainant in a sexual assault case, particularly now that police routinely accompany EMTs? If a disciplinary investigation itself is the cause of the need for emergency services, will investigators be trained to handle this?

Issue 3: Adaptive Resolution Processes

"... the local branch, Steering Committee or Disciplinary Committee may decide to attempt to resolve the matter through an adaptive resolution process (such as mediation, restorative practice, facilitated dialogue)."

The Guidelines offer adaptive resolution processes as a possible method for resolving complaints, but comrades on the current NDC have no training in this. I understand that committees have the option, not the requirement, to use adaptive resolution but the current NDC has received a complaint that we failed to consider the option of restorative practice.

Issue 4: We are untrained in proper techniques of criminal investigation, forensic analysis, and hearing procedures.

Conducting a hearing and investigation are not completely common sense matters. It requires training to interview without asking leading questions, to be able to determine if a bruise is self-inflicted, and to know the proper way to gather details from a sexual assault survivor without triggering a trauma response.

Issue 5: Continuity and Precedent

(a) How can we ensure that newly-elected committees learn from previous committees? There was some discussion this year of "establishing precedent." Who will keep records of precedent and how will it be transmitted?

(b) What is the protocol when a case is disrupted by February elections? We don't want participants to have to endure two investigations and two hearings.

### **Other Issues**

Due Process: When is a respondent's due process violated? Procedural missteps? Technical difficulties? Or only when the committee in question acts in a prejudicial/overtly unfair manner?

Support for Committee Members: The Guidelines point out that participants may be subject to subpoena by the courts. What support will be available to comrades who are subpoenaed?

### **Some Suggestions**

(1) I think it would be valuable for the NDC to try to write a yearly assessment to assist the Rules commission. This doesn't have to be a resolution, just "best practices."

(2) I think it would be a good idea for the NDC and the Rules commission to set up a Q&A once before and once during the first case of the year to ensure that the NDC, Rules commission, and the SC are on the same page regarding Guideline interpretations.

(3) We should train comrades tasked with services offered by the Guidelines in those services.

(4) Support services should be extended to committee members if they are required to deal with the aftermath of violence and sexual assault for extended periods of time. Witnesses may also need support.

(5) Keeping the temperature of discussions low is vital. The difficulties we face are not the fault of individual comrades or committees; they reflect the social problems of life under capitalism. This stuff isn't difficult because comrades and committees aren't doing their best. It's difficult because it's difficult.

### **Conclusion**

The Steering Committee and the Rules commission have worked very hard to develop a reasonable, effective, just, and democratic disciplinary process. I think we should be proud of what our organization is trying to accomplish. But I also think we need to recognize the significant organizational, social, and political challenges created by the process we set into motion at the 2013 Convention. I wish I could offer solutions and resolutions, but right now all I can offer is the best assessment I'm capable of giving. I hope these comments will contribute to a constructive and productive discussion.

**(Citation)**

National Center for the Prosecution of Violence Against Women's document "False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Investigate and Prosecute Non-Stranger Sexual Assault."

\* NOTE: Since submitting the document, my comment "from what I understand, it has been ruled that statements collected from complainants/respondents do not constitute evidence..." has been clarified: the ruling is not that statements cannot be used as evidence, but rather that statements collected from complainants/respondents do not *automatically* constitute *credible* evidence.

**Holly L., Austin**

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