

Pre-convention Bulletin #17 / February 2, 2014

for members only

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Convention information and deadlines

Convention location: Northwestern University. *We have received final confirmation from Northwestern University, so we will be holding the convention there.* We'll send out meeting room details as the convention approaches.

Listed below are two sets of items that include information for branches and a set of deadlines that will help us streamline the convention process. These are broken up into two parts. Please read all the way to the end, with special attention to the deadlines listed here. Thanks.

I. Below is a set of deadlines that will help us make sure that all comrades who are coming are pre-registered, that comrades who need free housing are offered it, and that the pre-convention bulletins contain as many resolutions and documents as necessary.

1. Delegates and guests:

Please send in the names of your branch's elected delegates along with requests for any guests you would like to attend. Twigs (groups of less than five members) are entitled to request a guest.

Please send an email with the words "delegate" and/or "guest" in the subject line to sharon@internationalsocialist.org. Your delegates will automatically be pre-registered. Guest requests will be answered on the Monday following the day you send in your request.

The deadline for delegate information and guest requests is Sunday, February 9.

2. Childcare:

We are committed to providing childcare to all delegates who require it. The childcare will take

place at the home of Chicago comrades.

If your branch is sending any delegates needing childcare during the convention, please send an email with the word “childcare” in the subject line to Cindy K. at Ckchigo@gmail.com. *The deadline for submitting childcare requests is Friday, February 7. This is a firm deadline, and we can't accept any requests after this date, as we will need enough time to arrange quality childcare.*

3. Housing:

Housing with comrades:

Chicago comrades are happy to offer free housing to all comrades who need it. But we are only able to guarantee floor space, so we strongly recommend that you bring a sleeping bag and a pillow.

If you want to request housing with comrades, send an email with the word “housing” in the subject line to either Carlos E. (xwbax777@hotmail.com) or Rory F. (rory@haymarketbooks.org). Please make sure to let us know in your email if the comrades requesting housing have any pet allergies, etc.

The deadline for requesting housing with Chicago comrades is Sunday, February 9.

Local hotels:

Comrades who are able to afford it might prefer to pitch in together to stay in a hotel. Below are a couple of suggestions—but if you find a good deal somewhere, please let us know and we'll pass it on to other comrades.

Unfortunately, the Best Western Hotel and the Orrington in downtown Evanston are booked up for Presidents' Day weekend. The other Evanston Hotels are fairly pricy.

There is one option worth considering for a larger group: The Homestead Evanston (1625 Hinman Avenue, Evanston, IL 60201). This hotel is located just two blocks from Northwestern University (closer than any other hotel). It has one-bedroom apartments with kitchens (which can save money on food—there is a Whole Foods in downtown Evanston). **These apartments cost \$185 per night, but you can probably squeeze in 6-7 people to save costs. When you register, however, you should only register as four guests, which is the maximum the hotel allows.** Their website is <http://thehomestead.net/results.cfm>.

One of the cheaper options is the Super 8 hotel (7300 North Sheridan Road, Chicago, IL 60626). This hotel is close to the red line “el” and just a few stops away from Northwestern. Their website is <http://www.super8.com/>. They are listing their rate for two queen beds at \$124.99 per night, but you can get a 15% discount on the rate if you book 7 days in advance.

4. Pre-convention documents and resolutions:

Deadline for all pre-convention submissions:

All documents and resolutions need to be submitted by Wednesday, February 12 at midnight CST if they are to be included in a pre-convention bulletin (although we strongly urge you to submit them earlier if you want comrades to have time to read them before the convention). All comrades who submit documents or resolutions after that time will be required to make their own copies to be distributed at the convention. We will include all of these in the post-convention bulletin, which reports back to the entire membership.

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

II. The second set of items, listed below, is meant to ensure that all branches are able to seat their delegates, which requires branches to abide by the ISO rules and procedures.

1. SW and dues:

All branches must be paid up on dues and SW to seat their delegates.

If your branch owes money for dues and/or SW, *please make sure to send it so that it arrives before the start of the convention:* the mailing address is ISO, P.O. Box 16085, Chicago, IL 60616.

If absolutely necessary, send outstanding payments along with your delegate. We discourage waiting until the convention to pay branch debts because it will interfere with the streamlined registration process, wasting time unnecessarily while other comrades are forced to wait.

2. Double dues payments for February.

The ISO rules require all members to pay double dues for the month of February. The extra month of dues is necessary to pay for delegates' plane fares to the convention. This is the most democratic way for us to ensure that comrades who live the farthest from Chicago (and therefore have the highest travel costs) are given adequate representation at the convention. Otherwise, those with the cheapest transportation would be over-represented and those with the most expensive travel costs would be under-represented.

Here is how to handle the double dues:

If your branch delegates will be flying to the convention, use the double dues money to reimburse your delegates. If you have any money left over, turn it in to the national office to help pay for other branches' delegates. If your branch's double dues are not enough to fully pay for your delegates' plane fares, the national office will make up the difference.

If your branch's delegates do not need to fly to the convention, you should turn over all your double dues to the national office to reimburse other branch's delegates.

Thanks to all comrades for attending to these issues as soon as possible. We expect this convention to be an important one, and we want to make sure that every branch is represented in the discussions and decisions that will take place.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact sharon@internationalsocialist.org.

Authorship clarification

The author of "Response to the ISO Renewal Faction document" (listed as "David B., Harlem/Uptown, NYC" in Pre-convention bulletin #16) has asked that he be characterized as "Dave Bl." as the signatory, since there are two "Dave B.'s" in the NYC District.

Discipline and democratic centralism

I'm writing because a number of contributions to the bulletin — including two from members of our national Discipline Committee (NDC) and one from the ISO Renewal Faction — have led me to suspect that last year's creation of the NDC is diverting comrades' attention from the role that elected leaders must play in the discipline of members.

I should say at the outset that I'm a member of the national Rules Commission created by the 2013 convention. The opinions I express in this document, however, are my own. I do not aim to speak for the commission.

Where we started

The main source of discipline in a democratic centralist organization is self-discipline. Most of the time, comrades abide by the group's rules and decisions because they know that's how the group works. In fact, it's what they agreed to do by the very act of deciding to join the group. The ISO's current rules state:

The ISO stands for democratic centralism because the revolutionary party must be a disciplined, activist combat organization. It is democratic in reaching its decisions and centralist in carrying them out. The lower bodies of the organization are subordinated to the higher bodies, and all are subordinated to the delegated convention. ISO rules are binding on all members of the organization....

A member is one who agrees with the politics of the ISO (as outlined in "Where We Stand"), accepts its constitution [i.e., rules], pays dues, and works within and under the direction of the appropriate bodies of the organization.

When a comrade does "break discipline" — by flouting a democratic decision, say, or through personal misconduct toward another member — the comrade is accountable to the larger group. Very often, individuals or small groups of comrades will bring up the issue with the comrade who they think has stepped out of line, and the problem gets resolved without ever becoming a discipline case. Other problems are harder to solve, and the elected leadership may need to step in.

Before the 2013 convention launched the Disciplinary Committee, comrades were disciplined by their branch committees or by the national Steering Committee (and maybe by organizers and district committees, though I don't know much detail about this). If disciplined individuals were dissatisfied with the result, they could resort to the Appeals Committee.

This kind of discipline is a built-in feature of democratic centralism, whereby the group and its democratically-elected leaders ensure that members abide by the organization's rules and decisions. At the local level, members "work within and under the direction of" their branch. For this reason, branch committees have served as the first resort in handling discipline cases. At the national level, the ISO's highest body is the National Convention, whose decisions are binding on all members. Between Conventions, the Steering Committee (SC) and National Committee (NC) carry the authority of the Convention. In practice, the SC has been the highest body to step in to make decisions about discipline. The ISO rules also state that the NC can take disciplinary actions, but I'm not sure it has ever done so.¹

¹ This account of discipline also leaves open the question whether the Convention, as the ISO's highest body, can or should ever serve as the final arbiter of a question of discipline. My first instinct is to say, "No, that's what we have an Appeals Committee for." This, of course, is not just a hypothetical question; delegates of the British SWP were asked to vote approval of the decision of the party's Disputes Committee in the case of "Comrade Delta." Comrades at the upcoming ISO convention may raise objections to some discipline decision of the past year. The current rules state that

By its nature, this kind of disciplinary process is individualized for the situation and the infraction. This means that each supposed infraction may call for a different method of investigation, a different process for deciding whether to discipline the comrade, and forms of discipline that are adapted to the comrade and the situation.

Our vicarious experience of the flaws in the British SWP's disciplinary process (exposed in the rape case against "Comrade Delta") spurred us to launch the NDC to supplement our already-existing methods. Or at least that's the way I understood it. Let's call that interpretation (1) — that the DC's procedures are a supplement to existing methods. I'm writing here because it's clear that some comrades are wondering: whether (2) leading bodies can still handle discipline cases, but only by adopting the NDC's formal procedures; or whether (3) branches should try to take care of discipline in the usual fashion, and the NDC — *but not the SC* — steps in when the local process is inappropriate or impossible.

Scattered statements in the current NDC guidelines actually provide some support for all three of these conflicting interpretations. Nevertheless, I will not try to parse the wording of the guidelines here; rather than offering a Talmudic interpretation of the text or its "original intent," I will try to show why *the ISO's leading bodies, both at the local and national level, should retain a major role in the discipline of members* — without being constrained to follow the formal procedures that apply to cases before the NDC.

The NDC is designed to operate in ways that are significantly different from the way that branch committees and the SC have approached discipline cases. I'll get to some of those differences below, but first I want to note that, last year, we were particularly looking for a process by which leading members, such as Comrade Delta, could be subject to discipline. This is clearly a problem that needs to be solved in a group that depends on the leadership to *impose* the discipline. It's this contradiction that gives rise to the need for a body whose operation is not dominated by the colleagues and buddies of the accused.

There are other problems, or at least potential pitfalls, with our usual methods of discipline, but the launch of the NDC was not supposed to solve them. One of the difficulties is that a branch leadership may be unprepared to deal with a problem as it comes up: the leaders may not recognize which situations call for them to step in; or they may not understand how to step in; or they may not know how to deal with interpersonal conflicts that disrupt the branch's political work; or the leaders may themselves be wrapped up in the conflicts they're trying to resolve; etc. To develop good judgment in dealing with such problems requires experience that many branch leaderships simply lack.

A branch leadership can compensate for its weakness if it gets help or good advice from organizers or the SC. In the process, the branch leaders and other comrades can learn lessons that strengthen their judgment in future cases. The direct participation of the SC may be crucial in resolving conflicts in which the local leaders are themselves "combatants," as has been the case in Boston in the past year. Of course, the SC's participation doesn't guarantee a resolution of the conflict. The point is that it's appropriate sometimes for the SC to step in, and it would be negligent for the SC to stand by when a conflict is damaging the collective work of a branch or a district.

Our usual methods for dealing with discipline have the virtue of flexibility. It can be useful, for example, to preserve a gray area where a problem is not (or is not yet) treated as a "case." Sometimes it's not clear what the problem is. The problem may indeed surface when one comrade makes an accusation against another, but not every accusation calls for a branch committee to launch an immediate disciplinary process against the accused. An accusation of misconduct, however, does call for the branch committee to get to the bottom of the problem, whether it develops into a discipline case or not.

This bit of flexibility contrasts with the way that the national Discipline Committee has to work, since the NDC's process is automatically triggered when it receives a written complaint. The NDC, of course, can

the Appeals Committee (AC) reports to the convention, but they don't say that the decisions of the AC are final. Nevertheless, the provisional guidelines for discipline issued by the SC after Convention 2013 do, in fact, declare that decisions of the AC are final.

refuse to hear a case, but it must do so through a process that includes a discussion of the written complaint and a formal vote. For the DC, the case begins as a discipline case, or doesn't begin at all.

How the Discipline Committee is different

Besides being a case against a leading member, the case against Comrade Delta had another important feature: It was a case of personal misconduct toward another member (as opposed, say, to a breach of political discipline). As such, the case had a definite individual complainant, and therefore was appropriate to take to the body they call the "Disputes Committee."

Our NDC likewise takes the form of a contest between complainant and respondent. Although the discipline cases that are handled at the branch level may sometimes have adversarial features, such features exert a decisive influence over the way the NDC functions. In particular, the procedures have to be explicit and clear in advance, and to apply to all possible cases, because fairness requires that the complainant and the respondent know in advance how to prepare for and to conduct their own cases.

According to the procedural guidelines currently in use, the NDC has the option of using "an adaptive resolution process (such as mediation, restorative practice, facilitated dialogue)," as long as both the complainant and the respondent agree — and as long as the case does not involve a charge of violence, robbery or sexual assault. If the DC does not adopt an adaptive resolution process, the committee proceeds with the case under its formal procedures.

The adversarial character of the formal procedures requires documentation at every step, including recordings of "witness interviews," in part to ensure that the opposing parties have equal access to evidence. In NDC cases, the requirement of documentation seems like a precondition of due process, but in most of the cases that branch committees and the SC handle, this requirement seems like it would be so much red tape. The best course may be to have several rounds of conversation rather than a series of recorded witness interviews, which could be both cumbersome and unnecessarily intimidating. In some cases, this way of proceeding might provide a better approximation of due process than what the NDC could achieve by its formal methods.

For the NDC's version of due process, the committee's procedures are broken into distinct phases: an investigation (which is optional), a hearing, a finding on whether the evidence supports the charge, and a phase where the NDC settles on a remedy (or a punishment). Branch committees and the SC can follow procedures that are much more fluid than this. The investigatory phase is not separate from the hearing phase; the end of the investigation simply comes when the leadership concludes whether an infraction has occurred, and what kind of infraction. At that point there may be a break into a new phase when the leaders start working out what to do about the problem — sometimes in consultation with the affected comrades. Even this division, however, can be artificial; sometimes it would make no sense for the leadership to delay its attempts to fix a problem until after all the data are in. If the leaders intervene to fix the problem in the process of investigating it, then the thing might never become a disciplinary case at all. It would just be a case of the leaders acting like leaders.

I'm not arguing that leading bodies should be completely unconstrained when they handle discipline cases. I'm saying that leading bodies should be constrained by goals and principles — such as the pursuit of fairness to individuals and the aim of strengthening the ISO's operation as a revolutionary organization — not by the types of mechanisms that must guide the procedure of a body such as the NDC.

Who and what I'm responding to

Holly L. and Keegan O., who both serve on the current DC, have asked questions about the role that leading bodies are supposed to play in discipline. Holly wrote:

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 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. [Preconvention Bulletin 13]

Without knowing more details about the case, this sounds like the branch committee may have handled the case appropriately — as long as (1) the commitment to believe women didn't create a presumption of guilt against the accused, (2) the branch committee allowed the respondent a chance to tell his/her side of the story, and (3) the respondent's narrative, if s/he offered one, was less compelling than the complainant's. Such a process, we should note, still leaves the expelled comrade the option of appeal to the AC, if s/he still contests the result.

Holly's question brings us back to the bad example of the case of Comrade Delta. Didn't we create the Discipline Committee specifically to handle tough cases such as those that involve charges of sexual assault? When ISO Convention delegates voted to form the NDC, they obviously had in mind that the ISO needs to take charges of sexual assault very seriously. Nevertheless, the fact that the Delta case involved a charge of rape might not, by itself, have driven us to invent a whole new way to handle discipline. What made the Delta case special was that the rape charge was also a charge against a member of the Central Committee. Branch committees and the SC have, in fact, handled difficult cases before, including battery in intimate relationships and sexual assault.

There is something to be said for avoiding DC-type procedures in at least some assault cases, because a branch committee or the SC can be fair to the accused while also acting rather swiftly and preserving confidentiality — without adding to the assault survivor's ordeal by dragging the case out in a formal, adversarial procedure. No doubt, branch committees and the SC itself could become more competent to deal with the tough cases. We might get closer to this goal through more discussion within the organization, perhaps including some specific training for branch leaderships. In light of what I've said above, any training in handling discipline cases would overlap substantially with training in solving everyday branch problems.

Aside from responding to Holly's question, I offer the foregoing points to address some of Keegan's concerns, including the difficulty that assault survivors face in following through with formal procedures. And I'm specifically replying to this:

As the rules state, the person filing the charge of rape against another member is required to provide a written statement to the disciplinary committee in order for this body to hear the case. If a member discloses their rape to someone not on the DC initially, and feels it is too traumatizing for them to disclose their experience yet again in the form of an official, written statement, what is the organization to do? Not hear the case? Accept that there is a member in the organization who has been accused of rape? [Preconvention Bulletin 15]

The organization can definitely hear the case, and everybody concerned should be aware that sometimes the NDC will be not be the best place to hear it.

As we try to find the proper role for the NDC alongside the disciplinary role of the ISO's leading bodies, we might think that nobody denies that it's legitimate for the Steering Committee to take disciplinary action of its own accord. Yet the Renewal Faction takes precisely this stand:

What about internal discipline in the ISO? Does the ISO not have mechanisms for dealing with charges of damaging and uncomradely behavior on the part of members? If the SC believes that

Shaun's behavior crossed the line, the SC should bring charges against Shaun before the Disciplinary Committee....

But we utterly reject the SC's skirting of the ISO's formal structures and mechanisms of due process in order to delegitimize the faction as a political formation within the ISO. [Preconvention Bulletin 16]

Leave aside the point that the SC doesn't need to take action against Shaun because he's not a member. Let's say that Member X engages in "damaging and uncomradely behavior." Member X has agreed, by joining the ISO, to work "under the direction of the appropriate bodies of the organization." The Convention is the highest body, and the SC carries the Convention's authority between meetings of the Convention. Thus *the SC is itself a legitimate agent of discipline* and does not have to appear as a complainant before the NDC in order to get disciplinary action taken. This isn't just a conclusion that we can draw from understanding the nature of democratic centralism. It also happens to be in the rules:

Disciplinary measures can be taken by branches, the National Committee or the Steering Committee if a member (or members) has not adhered to ISO rules or has engaged in conduct unbecoming a member (for example, violence or sexual harassment)....

Grievances and disciplinary measures should be handled at a branch level or may be referred to the Steering Committee. In those rare situations where branch committees, the Steering Committee, or individuals bringing a complaint feel that circumstances would prevent it from being properly heard, cases may be brought to the national Disciplinary Committee by either a branch committee, the Steering Committee, or an individual.

The "individual" in question — the one who is free to bypass the SC and take a case directly to the NDC — is the *complainant*, not the person charged with the offense. If the SC takes disciplinary action against Comrade X on its own accord, then Comrade X may take the case to the Appeals Committee. SC discipline, followed by appeal, is an instance of due process. The procedures of the DC (followed by appeal, as appropriate) can also achieve due process, but by a different path. The rules don't presume that either path is superior for all cases; in fact, the rules suggest that the DC should come into play only when the other paths are, for some good reason, blocked.

From this discussion, it should be clear that I disagree with the direction that David Bl. wants us to take with discipline cases:

In other words, we need to take further steps to ensure our members, whether they be the Shaun J's of the world, or whoever, are accorded the utmost due process when facing discipline. I reiterate that we should not give our own members less due process than the criminal system of injustice gives to the working class.... Thus, while I agree with the proposed changes to the ISO Rules, I submit we need to think more along the lines of formalizing the process. We need to institute a formal complaint form as well as a "charges" form, both of which would be posted on an internal website accessible to members via password. This way no complaints will be made against other members "in secret" nor will disciplinary charges be made against members without any ISO members being able to see for themselves what the charges are. [Preconvention Bulletin 16]

I agree that we need to improve the formal procedures of the NDC, but I'm skeptical that we can get the results we want for our organization by formalizing the process any more than it is already. Our DC members already face a major challenge in living up to the roles of competent investigators and fair "judges," and I don't think we should burden them by throwing them into an ever-deeper thicket of rules. The more procedures we add, the more we push all participants toward a mechanical approach that loses sight of the goals of the process.

As for David's specific suggestions of creating forms for complaints and charges — and posting them online — I have several objections. For one thing, I assume that, out of the ISO's whole membership,

there's at least one informant or agent, so a password won't stop the authorities from seeing the whole thing. An online catalog of accusations would be just the thing to help them stir up conflict within the group. This is exactly what the FBI did in the COINTELPRO program, except that we'd be sparing them the trouble of inventing conflicts by revealing real ones ourselves.

Second, while publishing the accusations may prevent them from remaining "secret" from other members, it would blow any hope for confidentiality out of the water. In fact, I'm sure that we would want to preserve the confidentiality of *complainants* in sexual assault and other serious cases, so the only thing that would appear online is a serious accusation against a named comrade — with the accuser's identity concealed. Of course, the identity of accusers in a sexual assault case may rightly be concealed from the public in some court proceedings, but why should we emulate what the courts do? We can protect the complainant's confidentiality by *not* posting the accusation online — since online posting would inevitably launch speculation and rumors about the complainant's identity — while preventing the public exposure of a comrade to serious accusations even before a case has been made. An online listing of all the complaints would be an invitation to destructive voyeurism.

Third, branch committees and the SC often take disciplinary action even when there's no definite complainant. An online compendium of complaints would probably represent just a fraction of discipline cases.

My main objection, however, is to the overall orientation of David's suggestions. The members of the NDC are scattered around the country and generally have no previous understanding of the situation that gives rise to the complaint. Of course, there will be cases that need to be taken out of the local "venue," but I believe that in most cases the local comrades' familiarity with the situation can be an advantage in solving the problem. Maybe we could use a standardized complaint form, but we shouldn't point comrades, as David does, in the direction of trying to solve their problems by choosing formality first and bypassing face-to-face conversation and argument at the local level. Local comrades need to learn how to get to the bottom of local problems and solve as many of them as they can. If they can't solve some of them, the Discipline Committee is not necessarily the "next resort." The Steering Committee might do a better job than the NDC — or the same branch committee might do a better job with help other leaders in a district, from organizers, or from the SC itself.

David W., Oakland branch

In with the old? Developing Cadre in the ISO today

The past three years have shown what is possible in our lifetimes but also the amount of work necessary to build a Left and organizations of the working class that can fight power with power. What role do we see our organization playing in the medium term? We believe the Left is qualitatively stronger post-Occupy but still has a long way to go. Central to our strategy for rebuilding a stronger left is the development of cadre. Put simply, if we do not develop cadre we will build on sand. If there is agreement that the political project of the ISO as a whole is to be a cadre building organization then there is a need for more clarity on what this means and what this looks like.

On a general level we should understand cadre as members who are trained in Marxist politics, capable of acting as Marxists everywhere they go, committed to building Leninist organization and are leaders both inside and outside the organization. While there will always be a division of labor, we aim to develop a cadre that both recruits, trains and develops members *while* leading struggles in workplaces, social movements and on the Left more broadly.

It is cadre who are rooted in different workplaces, communities and movements that are capable of bringing the collective leads and assessments generated in the ISO into the work they do, who are in the position to help shape struggles and push them forward, and also bring that experience back to the ISO and have it interact and shape our internal collective process and decision making.

Only the development of this type of membership could allow us to accomplish a rather difficult task of the moment: not adapting to the low level of politics that exists in the US, while at the same time being patient and engaged with the people we work and organize with. It means having a bigger vision that can withstand

the volatility of our lives and the struggles we build while, at the same time, being rooted in long term organizing. It means constantly advancing one's own political development while also training new members in the very basics of Marxism.

How we've developed cadre in the past

The ISO is a qualitatively different organization than it was five years ago. An advance in implantation and possibilities for growth has created new challenges. In New York City we have struggled in particular with cadre development over the last several years as our most developed cadre have shifted the bulk of their political time away from training members in branches to leading outside the organization. The aim of this document is to raise some issues and questions about what cadre development looks like in a changing ISO. There is no easy, automatic process that makes someone into a Marxist activist. This is why the question of cadre development warrants more discussion.

New circumstances can often demand new routines. But first we must start with the routines that developed the cadre we have today. For much of the time we've been members (2003 and 2007), we existed in a situation where there were few (at times no) sustained struggles, the Left was weaker than it is today and we were often swimming against the stream of political consciousness. In this context we were able to set priorities internally and the training and developing we did was carried out based on momentum we generated through our routines. Routines such as political education, contact meetings, branch meetings, and SW sales/tablings were the scaffolding around which we developed people in the absence of ongoing movements to relate to. This meant a few things:

- By necessity we strove to create a political culture that could steel comrades in a tradition and a set of politics regardless of what people around us thought
- There was a collective sense of development following a general pattern: join, read, chair, give a talk, head up a fraction, join a branch committee (this is oversimplified but were some of the steps)
- Political education was a main driving force of branch momentum and recruitment and was inbuilt into structures and routines (while also creating a political culture that inspired members to read independently)
- Much of our political activity revolved around reading and knowing the arguments in Socialist Worker, doing SW sales, and setting up contact meeting based on SW. This gave a common political reference point for everyone to be constantly debating and discussing while having a weekly means to gauge consciousness nationally. This was paired with having to go out and test out arguments in practice. SW sales were primarily a tool of developing: it was where new members learned how to set a lead, how to organize an operation, how to explain complex politics simply, how to answer questions about the full range of our politics and how to assess.

The tools comrades learned and taught through these routines were what prepared people to go into a coalition meeting or protest and know what to do. This isn't to say we always did things correctly, but there were constant inbuilt mechanisms of discussion, action and assessment that gave direction, purpose and put comrades in positions to lead internally and externally.

What's changed?

Since 2008 we believe the ISO has changed significantly. Most notably, the most experienced layer of the organization has increased implantation in various movements and in individual workplaces. This followed the "let it breathe" organizational perspective in 2011 that called on branches to experiment with structures, position newer members in leading positions and provide more time for experienced members to implant themselves *outside* of campuses and branches. There were newfound opportunities to train cadre to not just lead internally, but to lead externally. Occupy then significantly furthered this shift, providing a place where our membership could be trained daily in struggle and providing, despite the de-centered nature of Occupy, a central focus for the district and nationally from which to generalize, assess and train.

This completely changed our branch routines: how we did contact work, conducted education, organized tablings, and saw ourselves in relationship to the Left. This experience, despite the collapse of Occupy and the questions produced as a result of the collapse, inspired our membership and gave confidence to our ability to lead practically and politically. It gave us concrete experience that reaffirmed a wider openness to

socialist politics and the importance of implantation that can use our experience and relationships on the Left to organize on a much grander stage when such opportunities exist.

Yet since Occupy we have yet to create an organization that can continue the work of implantation while dedicating resources to developing cadre and building the ISO. Not for a lack of trying.

We are operating on very different political terrain. The routines that trained the most experienced cadre in our district no longer exist and a debate has emerged about how to replace these routines with ones that can develop cadre in a different political climate.

What are the current challenges?

- Lack of unified focus -For much of the ISO's history, there was an ability to have a unified focus and generalize with greater ease. Branch routines, membership requirements, movement debates were shared nationally in a way that does not (and possibly cannot) exist today. We believe much greater centralization is necessary and more focus on strategic priorities would help. Finding a political and organizational center for the organization would in turn allow for greater flexibility and breadth of practice. This could enrich and deepen our cadre. Instead it, at times, feels like opportunities produce a centrifugal force. This increases the feeling of members acting as individual activists instead of representing the ISO with a clear strategy.
- Strengthening our political foundations - In a highly uneven cadre base, debate can disorient rather than clarify. To address this we believe we need a stronger foundation upon which to debate the most pressing questions facing the Left and revolutionaries today. This would involve more resources placed in political education for all levels of membership: new members, cadre and use of political education initiatives to project the ISO and grow.
- More centralization - In our district, student work, neighborhood/city branch building and movement fractions operate more separately than in years past. Students, where we are experiencing the largest audience for our politics, do not feel part of a larger organization. Those who are most implanted in movements often prioritize that work over branch building. Those whose main political role is centered on branch meetings struggle to incorporate movement strategy within branches. This contributes to developing cadre in too narrow of roles or recruiting members with a much more narrow understanding of what being an organized revolutionary means. We have lost a more widespread understanding of the totality of our politics and practice, key to developing cadre.
- Political narrowing - The separation between branch building and movement work has distorted what it means to be a leader or cadre in our organization as the ability to *both* lead internally within the ISO and externally (in movements) is lessened. This has often meant our most experienced comrades, those best positioned to train the next layer, only do so within narrow channels. And often not within branches where most of our new members and developing cadre are.
- Our routines no longer train - We have lost many of the routines that provided a clearer strategy for developing cadre. Yet the opportunity to develop a deeper cadre exists more so now than since we've been members.

It's always easier to locate challenges than produce ideas that can address such challenges. In order to come up with possible actions to address the challenges, we need a much more engaged and developed membership than currently exists.

A number of documents have been written addressing questions of internal democracy. There exist different opinions in the ISO about whether we are currently a democratic organization or whether we could be more democratic. While we believe that organizational proposals such as whether to continue the slate system or whether to publish minority reports are indeed important questions, the larger question underlying the relationship between leadership, engagement and democracy is actually one of cadre development. Beyond specific organizational forms, cadre development can only take place in an organization where every member feels ownership, understands and is committed to the politics of revolutionary Marxism, takes part in the discussions which help shape the organization, builds the ISO and has a clear role within the organization. This is the key to a democratic organization with an active

membership that feels equipped and able to argue, debate and shape the direction of our work on a branch, district and movement level.

What does ownership mean?

We need a more political understanding of the question of ownership beyond a review of democratic structure in the abstract or an experimentation with structure that provides a feeling of ownership that is fleeting. First and foremost, ownership is directly connected to the level of political understanding and commitment to the project of the ISO. This is not about a loyalty statement following a review of Where We Stand but we feel, in an absence of strong political education routines, buddy systems, and dispersal of cadre, many who have joined the ISO in the past few years have less opportunity to learn the history and politics of our organization and incorporate that into their political practice.

This contributes to a weaker political center where newer members feel less equipped to help shape the direction of the organization or take part in debates that challenge a Marxism or Leninism they themselves don't fully understand or have the confidence to defend and win others to.

The internal culture of the ISO (since we've been members) has changed from those joining, shaping and carrying out an agreed upon perspective to more of an individual approach to the ISO where a members political activity is determined primarily by that individual. Members operating more as individuals instead of as a collective hinders democracy. It weakens collective ownership and accountability to each other and the organization.

The ability for a leadership body to assess the totality of the branch or district's work is challenging due to the breadth of political work conducted by our members and the lack of centralizing mechanisms where that work is reported on, brought into branches, and assessed. Leadership bodies are best positioned to form perspectives and create political leads based on (even limited) knowledge of the totality of this practice but it remains partial without a collectively engaged membership. This increases the distance between leadership and the membership as a whole.

In addition to strengthening our centralization of prioritization, assessment and purpose, we believe that a renewed emphasis on political education routines (for all layers of membership) is also needed for developing comrades' ability to lead both internally and externally. There is no 10 step program for cadre. And we are increasingly recruiting folks who come from much more varied backgrounds, including many more with previous activist experience. What the development of cadre looks like for one member will look different from another.

Collectivizing our routines for development of cadre requires an infrastructure and method that does not see cadre development as a purely "self-selecting" act on the part of individual members. It also requires that we not look for shortcuts in this process. In the absence of routines for such a long period of time, there is a danger of over complicating even the simplest political tasks in hopes that it's training members along the way. This can dampen initiative and increase the fear of making a mistakes. We have found that there is a widespread lack of confidence in our district that we have been in the process of trying to address.

What have we tried?

- Membership Development Fraction - We created a number of citywide fractions in NYC with the membership development fraction being one of them. It has worked to re-introduce the buddy system, organize skills based classes (chaining, selling and writing for SW, etc), and begun the process of creating more infrastructure for political education. We found that prioritizing membership development largely meant rediscovering old routines rather than inventing new ones. One weakness of this fraction is that its taken membership development out of the central place we have historically used to develop members (branches) and placed it in a citywide fraction that feels more autonomous to the district as whole.
- Marxism Day School - Our Fall day school, centered on developing members instead of projection, was an important step forward for our district. It helped politicize and ground a number of debates. But there was also frustration that the conference was "too basic" and didn't provide space for more experienced members to debate. The membership development fraction assessed that our more experienced members struggle to raise questions and make arguments in an accessible way that can contribute to a discussion and raise the level of politics of the entire room. The role of cadre is to help train and deepen the politics of the next layer. However, this must be combined with more political education initiatives in the district targeted toward existing cadre.

- All women's meeting - We identified that there was a layer of women in the district who were committed members over a period of years but still lacked confidence to lead. We created a short-term political team that sought to advance the district on questions of Marxism and Feminism (did a citywide talk on the topic, read Angela Davis and then proposed Women, Race and Class as a district-wide book discussion) and we organized an all-womens meeting to see what our members felt were holding them back from developing. It was a productive and powerful meeting where the specific issue facing women and mothers in particular were strategized around, the need for a buddy system was generated largely from this meeting and we brainstormed other ways to bring the conversation into the district as a whole. We organized it as a one-off meeting. Our goal was to politicize questions of confidence and brainstorm ways to address this as an organization.
- Biweekly meetings - We reorganized the district to have branch meetings meet bi-weekly and citywide fractions meeting bi-weekly. The aim of the restructuring was to create more room for fractions to deepen and politicize the discussions of strategy in their respective movements and it came from a recognition that much of our work is citywide and not bound my branches. This reorganization is still being assessed. We believe one casualty of this is that while it created space for the existence of a membership development fraction, losing weekly branch meetings as a space where people come together, discuss and debate politics, take on responsibility and are accountable to one another set back member integration and cadre development.

What could we move toward?

Meeting the opportunities and challenges of the moment requires that our organization work towards infrastructure and mechanisms to better develop cadre. The forms that these will take can only be figured out in a process of trial and error through the course of practical organizing. We certainly don't claim to have the solution, but we have been in a process in NYC of attempting to move towards addressing cadre development. What we have found is that many of the needs of the district that we have identified are norms that were previously shared across the membership. Part of assessing and putting forward next steps requires also looking back, seeing what has worked in the past, and figure out what is still worth applying and what needs to be changed. It's also about seeing cadre development more holistically, not just centered in one fraction or gained through one initiative but returning to a method that incorporates cadre development into every aspect of our political practice.

Among the things we think could start to move us in the right direction are:

- Where necessary, an assessment of our current degree of implantation. Do we currently have sufficient resources dedicated to train cadre in each branch? If not, what needs to change?
- Where possible, various levels of education - There is a reality that we have an organization with a wide range of political levels and experience. How can we find ways to both give new members the tools of more basic Marxist politics while at the same time having collective discussion of the higher level questions and debates that longer-time cadre are grappling with?
- Buddy system and co-heads of fractions - With the deterioration of our collective modes of operating, our district has also lost the intentional, coordinated individual development of members through individualized forms. This means utilizing experienced members as "go to" comrades for newer members to talk through questions and debates, orient around perspectives, help prepare for a talk, etc. This could also take the form of a developing leader pairing up with an experienced comrade in heading up an area of work. This type of one-on-one training is equally as important for cadre as for newer members. As a consequence of implantation, it is less clear the role that cadre play in the day to day functioning of the group. *Cadre will always be needed to develop the next layer of cadre.*
- Pre-meetings - Bringing back the pre-meeting as a means of preparing our comrades to intervene in something collectively. This small task can go a long way in helping members prepare and think through what we are trying to get out of an event/meeting and sets a tone of collective participation that can be assessed. These can play a role in training newer members think through a political intervention as a socialist.

- Developing a strategy for female cadre, queer cadre and cadre of color - We believe that the question of developing cadre of color and female cadre in particular should be discussed organization wide, namely, is there a distinct and/or separate strategy for such development than what exists for the membership as a whole? How can this be made more explicit?

Currently our district is at a time of reorganization. It has had an internalizing character that we are working to balance with the opportunities that exist for the growth of a radical Left and a larger and stronger ISO within that. We need a district with a stronger political and organizational center that can effectively lead when struggle demands it and, when struggle wanes, a political home to return to to prepare for the next battle.

Leia P and Natalia T, New York City

ISO and Elections 2014: ISO Elections Committee Report

In December, the Steering Committee appointed an ISO Elections Committee. This committee was delegated by the SC as an advisory body charged with assisting the ISO in researching, coordination, endorsements, etc., under direction of SC. We plan to continue through 2014 and then assess. This document aims to discuss why this potential has reemerged, how socialists see elections under capitalism, and some proposals for how to proceed.

1. Conditions for a challenge to the left of the Democrats. Entering into the sixth year of Obama's presidency, there are signs that a space is opening up to the left of the Democratic party for challenges at the ballot box. The last time this dynamic presented itself on a national scale was in 2000, after eight years of Clinton and in the midst of the global justice movement. That year, Ralph Nader and the Green Party secured nearly 3,000,000 votes, or 2.7% of the national vote. 911 cut short that potential on a national scale, although there were several important local or state-wide scale (Matt Gonzalez winning 47% of the San Francisco mayor's race as a Green in 2003, Peter Camejo's campaigns for CA governor in 2002 and 2003, etc.) Since then, the ISO has supported several left-independent or Green campaigns (Nader/Camejo in 2004, Aaron Dixon in Seattle and Camejo/Chretien in 2006 in CA, Howie Hawkins in NY, etc.) but in general, we have not judged the electoral field as the best place for us to expend resources for much of the last decade.

Socialist Alternative's Kshama Sawant's victory for Seattle city council in a city-wide race (winning over 90,000 votes and beating a well-respected Democratic incumbent) clearly marks the left's biggest electoral success since 2000 and raises the question of action in the electoral field for the ISO and the left in general in 2014 and 2016. While we couldn't have predicted the scale of Sawant's success, we pointed to the potential for an electoral expression of left-wing politics in the run up to our 2013 ISO Convention,

The final point—about the possibility of a political alternative—will bear watching over the next period. In 2012, support for third-party alternatives to the left of the Democrats was low, and the campaigns for Jill Stein and Roseanne Barr, et al., were weak. Nevertheless, compared to 2008, when millions held “hope” in Obama, sympathy for an argument in favor of challenging the Democrats from the left increased. The “Occupy” milieu demonstrated this skepticism to the two big business parties, even if most of its members may have voted (grudgingly) for Obama and the Democrats. If the experience of the last neo-liberal two-term Democratic administration provides guidance, the emergence of a substantial third party or electoral alternative can't be ruled out. The 2000 Nader Green Party campaign provided a political vehicle for a layer of activists, fed up with eight years of Clintonism, to break to the Democratic Party's left. While our emphasis will continue to be on building organizations that can mount a struggle against Washington's austerity agenda the struggles themselves will have a political echo whose

sentiment we will want to encourage. ("State of US Politics," Lance S, Pre-Convention Bulletin #1)

2. Revolutionary Socialists and Elections. With the rise of large socialist parties in Germany and France in the decades after the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, Marx and Engels developed a sophisticated approach to electoral tactics and sought to place those tactics in an overall strategy of working-class self-organization and struggle. Since then, socialists have always sought to enter into the electoral arena to challenge mainstream, pro-capitalist parties in a very wide variety of historical contexts.

In the midst of the Nader 2000 campaign, Paul D wrote an ISR piece reviewing the classic Marxist positions on elections under capitalism. http://www.isreview.org/issues/13/marxists_elections.shtml This piece is especially valuable to give comrades a sense of the ABC's of our attitude toward the electoral tactic and we will not attempt to reproduce this discussion at length here. The opening lines of Paul's article suffice:

What attitude do Marxists take to elections and representative government? In the history of the socialist movement there have developed or coexisted two principal and, in the end, quite different and opposing views of the question. One, reformism, argues that modern representative government affords the working class the opportunity to achieve socialism by electing a socialist majority into office. This view emphasizes the peaceful, gradual transition to socialism, and sees campaigns around elections and the work of socialist elected officials as the most important aspect of socialists' activity. The other trend, first outlined by Marx and Engels, and then elaborated by Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin, argues for a revolutionary overthrow of the state, based upon the mass struggle of the working class, and its replacement by new organs of workers' power?

In the first view, elections are a means to take over the existing state and infuse it with socialist candidates. In the second view, elections are seen as a subordinate political tactic which must be integrated into an overall strategy of building up working-class organization and consciousness on the road to a clash with the existing relations of production and the state which sanctifies and guards them.

This does not mean accepting the limits of the sorts of elections that are permitted by the capitalist state, but it does mean understanding that most workers maintain, especially in advanced capitalist states with long traditions of electoral democracy, a higher or lesser degree of loyalty to these institutions (just think of the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle to win the vote for women). Thus, revolutionaries must not abstain from fighting on these grounds (when it is practically possible). Lenin explains this dynamic in his book *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, written in 1920 in an attempt to overcome the ultraleftism then prevalent (especially) in the German KPD:

Parliamentarism has become "historically obsolete." That is true as regards propaganda. But everyone knows that this is still a long way from overcoming it practically. Capitalism could have been declared, and quite rightly, to be "historically obsolete" many decades ago, but that does not at all remove the need for a very long and very persistent struggle on the soil of capitalism....

Participation in parliamentary elections and in the struggle on the platform of parliament is obligatory for the party of the revolutionary proletariat...As long as you are unable to disperse the bourgeois parliament and every other type of reactionary institution, you must work inside them...

What does this mean for us today in the United States? Alan M's document, "Perspectives" (2014 PCB #1), analyzes the political and economic developments over the last five years since Obama's election and the onset of the Great Recession. Alan describes the defining character of working-class struggle today as such:

Leon Trotsky used a metaphor to describe such patterns, comparing them to a person recuperating after a long illness. The first signs of recovery look very promising compared to the immediate past. But the patient almost never has a recovery to full health right away. They won't necessarily be up to more strenuous activity after exercising their muscles for the first time...

We can put other countries at different points on the road to recovery—as for the U.S., we've seen struggles flex their muscles and show signs of unanticipated energy and strength in the past few years, but the period of the last year has been one of more setbacks than advances. In determining our perspectives, we need to recognize both the setbacks and the fewer, but still significant, advances—and figure out what we can do that will best contribute to rebuilding the patient's health.

There are many things to say about this dynamic, but in so far as it pertains to the question of elections, if we accept that the US working class is a patient still in recovery, then that help explains Sawant's election. If the working class does not feel confident and strong enough to directly fight the bosses through strikes (and strikes remain very rare), and other forms of direct actions (like Occupy) were isolated by repression, then many radicalizing students and workers will naturally look to an "easier" form of activity. Voting for a candidate to solve problems for you can appear to be one such activity, and it is sanctioned by the system as "acceptable" and "legitimate" political activity. Normally, the Democratic Party preys on this sentiment and uses this passive support in order to betray and demoralize its supporters. The job of revolutionaries in this situation is not to counterpose "hard" forms of struggle (strikes and mass mobilizations) to "easy" forms (elections), but to attempt to conduct both in such a way as to increase the independence, organization and confidence of the working class, or a section of it.

Looking to the ballot box for radical political change can also sometimes serve as a critical therapy (to stay with the medical analogy) in the patient's recovery. That is, on the condition that there are political forces which seek to nurture that radical minority's dissatisfaction and channel it into support for an independent, pro-working-class program, active political organization and an understanding that voting for a radical candidate should be seen as the forerunner (or immediately connected) to the question of how to take radical action on the part of those voters themselves.

3. Obstacles to challenging the Democrats? Normally, the political allegiance of liberal, environmental, women's, LGBTQ, Black and labor organizations to the Democrats, presents extremely high barriers to the development of left-wing electoral alternatives. After the 2000 elections, the liberal wing of the Democratic Party turned viciously on the Green Party and broke its trajectory as a growing political threat to the two-party duopoly. Most of Nader's leading high-profile advocates from 2000 (Medea Benjamin, Michael Moore, etc.) either openly supported the Democrats John "Reporting for Duty" Kerry in 2004 or adopted a "safe state" strategy, pledging to vote for Greens only in races where they could not possibly threaten the Democrat's chance of winning. Even many socialists and radicals dismiss any attempt to challenge the Democrats at the ballot box. For example, in 2012, Freedom Road Socialist Organization leader and well-respected labor author and strategist Bill Fletcher wrote,

So, if we on the Left really want to discuss electoral politics we must examine a concrete question: what do we do in the USA given the nature of the electoral system? If your answer is to simply raise the red flag of radicalism to see who salutes, with all due respect, you are not serious about politics; you are stuck in the world of pure ideology...

We should not start with organization in the abstract, but with program. We then need to figure out under what conditions we run people within Democratic Party primaries and under what circumstances we run independently.

<http://www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/blogs/bill-fletcher/item/205-electoral-politics>

Fletcher's position originated in the US with Stalin's Popular Front strategy, foisted on the Communist Party's starting in 1935, when he ordered the US Communist Party to make a "tactical" alliance with FDR and the Democrats. Stalin's policy sabotaged nearly 40 years of independent, working-class challenges to the two-party system, most notably Eugene V. Debs winning 6% of the presidential vote in 1912 for the

Socialists. Since then, the Communist Party has operated as a (tiny) faction within the Democratic Party. Even at the height of the mass movements of the 1960s and 1970s, many revolutionaries attempted to enter the Democratic Party to pull it to the left. For example, the Black Panther Party supported Democrat Jerry Brown for California governor in 1974 and most of the Maoist revolutionary groups formed in the 1970s enthusiastically supported Jesse Jackson's 1984 campaign in the Democratic Primaries. (See, Lance Selfe, *A History of the Democratic Party*)

Thus, socialists who seek to challenge the strangle hold of the Democrats over the forces of the left not only face huge legal/structural barriers (restrictions to ballots, no proportional representation, vast amounts of cash, access to the media, etc.), we also stand in a very small minority on the American left (at least since the New Deal) who even attempt to break through this impasse.

4. Anatomy of Sawant's Campaign. So how was Socialist Alternative (a group of no more than a couple dozen in Seattle) able to seemingly rise above all this and break through? In one sense, it has to be said that they got lucky - and we are very happy they did! Sawant was an excellent candidate, a popular community college professor, running against an older, stale white incumbent Democrat in a non-partisan race where there was absolutely no threat from the Republicans. Much like Matt Gonzalez's race for SF mayor in 2003, their campaigns tapped into young voters' alienation from mainstream politics, they articulated key issues, they had cool graphics, music and parties, the establishment was caught by surprise, and, critically, the election "fit." (See, Todd Chretien, "A Left Alternative in S.F. Election," http://socialistworker.org/2003-2/478/478_02_SFMayor.shtml)

Both of these elections were non-partisan (no dangers from the Right), city-wide races (it can be harder to unseat a popular local person tied to a specific neighborhood) in cities with surging youth/art/music/tech scenes and a section of the unions which were willing to support a left challenger to "shake things up." Finally, both cities had hip weekly magazines with a history of endorsing non-traditional candidates and these helped both Sawant and Gonzalez level the publicity playing field. None of these observations are meant as criticisms, they only point to the difficulties of automatically reproducing these conditions easily elsewhere.

Both campaigns also came on the heels of large movements which had recently been defeated (the anti-war movement in San Francisco and Occupy in Seattle). Thus, both candidates had a layer of recently activated people to both support and work on their campaigns. To their credit, Socialist Alternative recognized this dynamic and happened to be in the right place at the right time to take advantage of it.

The other central factor in Sawant's win was the Fight for 15. She rightly championed the cause and tapped into the growing national consciousness of this movement. It was not the case that there was a powerful or massively organized movement already pre-existing in Seattle for 15, even if the unions did plow energy into winning the \$15 referendum in Seatac (the small municipality surrounding Seattle's international airport). However, Sawant's campaign focused this sentiment in Seattle and allowed her to give a concrete expression to class anger as well as a realizable goal to fight for if elected.

5. What is Socialist Alternative. This is not the place for a long analysis of SAlt as an organization, but suffice it to say that they are associated with an international Trotskyist current (the Militant in the UK - now called the Committee for a Workers International) which has always put an enormous emphasis on the importance of standing in elections for propaganda purposes and prioritized the development of a labor party, often without clear regard for concrete conditions.

This strategic orientation can even lead to a tendency to treat social movements as platforms upon which to win activists over to supporting electoral campaigns and this contrasts with the ISO's approach. For example, in Seattle, while the ISO branch has worked over the last two years to organize clinic defense, oppose evictions and the new Jim Crow, helped initiate the Transit Riders Unions and lead the MAP boycott, SAlt has largely focused on running Sawant in elections (first for State Assembly and then city council). For SAlt, the dynamic referred to above (students and workers voting for radicals as a step towards taking radical action) can sometimes seem to become an end in itself.

At the moment, SAlt appears to be absolutely correctly attempting to translate their electoral success into a real campaign to Fight for 15. On that basis, the ISO is working alongside them to prepare this campaign and we will see in practice how our relationship develops.

SAlt's decision to run openly as socialists is very interesting and it shows that there is something to the polls which show how open, especially young, people are to socialist ideas. SAlt overstates the degree to which most people are "voting socialist," instead, but this shouldn't prevent us from appreciating the openness the results represent. In fact, there seems to be a tension between SAlt's analysis when they sometimes give a much more balanced picture of the mixed motivations in their voting base and when they proclaim the "historic" nature of Sawant's election. In fact, there is a danger that SAlt may overgeneralize how easy and straight forward the tasks of establishing a real, national, sustained break with the Democrats will be. Their international leader, Peter Taafe, recently published this in SAlt's newspaper,

there is the political earthquake represented by the election in Seattle, for the first time in 100 years, of a socialist, Kshama Sawant, sympathetic to the CWI. This was, moreover, a reflection of the anger brewing in the US against capitalism that saw the radical democrat Bill de Blasio elected as Mayor of New York City, with 73% of the vote. In Lorain County, Ohio, 24 'Independent Labor' candidates sponsored by the unions were elected. This undoubtedly betokens a movement towards a US radical third-party – with already two thirds in opinion polls favouring this – on a national scale at a certain stage.
<http://www.socialistalternative.org/news/article11.php?id=2262>

This sort of triumphalism will make it more difficult, not easier, to build on Sawant's impressive performance. On the other hand, having just won a huge election victory, the SAlt comrades in Seattle have earned the right to a few rhetorical flourishes and we should judge them more by their long-term actions.

For more information about SAlt, see Steve L's document in 2014 PCB, "Who Won in Seattle," and to hear one of their members in discussion with the ISO, go to: <http://wearemany.org/v/socialism-at-ballot-box>

6. ISO's Electoral Experience. Having made these general statements, what have we learned in our own electoral activity?

Challenges:

a. Most left-wing, independent electoral campaigns don't go anywhere because the odds are stacked against us. It may or may not be a useful expense of energy and resources to run a campaign for propaganda purposes that aims to win a tiny minority of the vote. And it is difficult in advance to predict which campaigns might "catch" and become more of an organizing focus. Be that as it may, you have to commit to them for a significant amount of time in order to find this out. And even the ones that do take off require (at a minimum) several months of preparation and go-slow work, while only really getting "hot" for a couple months, or 6 weeks at the end.

b. There are all sorts of illusions that people develop in campaigns and candidates and there *is* a tendency to place hopes in an individual instead of class struggle and mass movements... even when the candidate says that those movements are the point of the campaign. [In 2006 when I ran as the Green candidate for U.S. Senate, many good activists would ask me, with a straight face in all sincerity, what I was going to do when I was elected. I received 1.5% of the vote! *Note from TC*]

c. Campaigns present all sorts of challenges with respect to legal requirements, entanglement with Democrats and endorsers, fund-raising, etc. Perhaps one of the most difficult questions for us to assess is **what constitutes genuine independence from the Democratic Party in local non-partisan races**. Since most major urban centers (and college towns) are dominated by the Democratic Party, most local races are (even when they are non-partisan) really about different factions and personalities (and their associated business interests) within the Democrats. You will often hear candidates rail against "the machine" and "city hall" and declare that they are the "people's candidate who won't be beholden to special interests," blah, blah, blah. But when push comes to shove, these local candidates fall into line in terms of backing the

state-wide and national Democrats in primaries and general elections. You may even find Greens or candidates who are registered independent who effectively form the liberal edge of the Democratic Party. Thus, simply looking at the registration of a candidate is insufficient.

This question is especially vexed because there are so few situations in which even genuinely independent, radical candidates have any relationship to a party, political organization, union or movement. That is, most of them present themselves as individuals and there is no platform or party-like organization that can discipline them. Conversely, the non-partisan set up may provide challenges on the other side. For instance, if a striker or a family member of a police brutality victim decided to quit the Democratic Party and to run for office on an excellent platform, but local laws required switching party affiliation one year prior to the election, we would have to look long and hard at that situation.

These questions do not generally exist in state and national races where the Democratic primary excludes non-Democrats, so the question of independence is generally clearer. However, even in this instance, there are exceptions. For example, in 2004, David Cobb ran for president for the Green Party. He narrowly won a hotly-contested nomination at their Convention. The Greens are on record as a party opposed to the Democrats, yet his pledge to run a “safe state” strategy effectively positioned the Greens as “loyal opposition” to the Democrats and undermined their status as a real opposition force. Jill Stein’s refusal to follow such a course in 2012 shows that there is still potential for alliances between Greens and socialists, but it is not automatic.

d. Some small sectarian organizations, such as the Party for Socialism and Liberation, run candidates merely for the purposes of promoting their own organization in the hopes of recruiting one or two people. They do not aim to build up unity and fighting capacity on the left with these campaigns, but only to advertise their own brand. We must learn to distinguish these exercises in futility from genuine attempts to use elections to strengthen the left.

Opportunities:

a. Given the continued low level of struggle, there is a way in which electoral campaigns can be seen by some as a path of least resistance to get involved in political activity. As elections are what count for “politics” in the U.S. for most people, a campaign can open a door to speak to large numbers of people in the post-Occupy world on a broad range of issues. Throughout 2014 and potentially into 2016, an electoral tactic may give us a clearer point of engagement with a large number of people in a discussion. We can stake a claim to the political discourse to a greater or lesser extent and engage people in a discussion about what it takes to change the world and why the Democrats are an obstacle. Rather than see it as a distraction or a diversion from our “real” work we should see the few electoral campaigns we engage in as helping diversify our work and build a more complex and flexible organization.

b. The time tables set by the election are known in advance and we can plan accordingly. An election campaign allows us to speak (and organize as we did in 2006) around multiple issues simultaneously. Especially since the “movement” organizations remains so weak and fragmented, this seems to me now especially useful. For instance, campaigns can hold speakouts, events, debates, fundraisers, forums, pickets, sit-ins, direct actions, etc. and/or participate in all of these sorts of activities when organized by other forces. For example, imagine the “Powershift” conference in 2016 with Jill Stein running for president and a real argument about making her the keynote speaker. SAIt did an excellent job of using the FF15 demand to both raise its own profile as a campaign and to push towards a referendum on next year’s ballot. The Bay Area ISO did a similar thing in 2005 with Proposition I (College Not Combat), in which we initiated and led an effort to collect 20,000 signatures, placing and winning a resolution against military recruiters in public high schools in San Francisco.

c. Campaigns can help train comrades how to speak and organize. There is nothing better than having to give a speech to wide varieties of people and learning how to talk to the press in order to train public speakers. Likewise, election campaigns demand clear internal organization (campaign managers, volunteer coordinators, etc.) and this can help us train members politically and practically. There can be a tension between building social movements of the left and electoral campaigns. This was a central argument we

had with the best of the GP in 2006 around the Million Votes for Peace campaign in California and other GP campaigns that won around that time (for example, Green Party mayor Gayle McGlaughlin in Richmond, CA).

This relates to the opportunities around how the FF15 work can connect to other smaller struggles we're already involved in and relationships we've developed. This is what was attempted with the College Not Combat Prop I work when we organized a teachers focused petition day and rally for Prop I — we connected years of work in teachers unions for quality education to the idea that poor working class students should have access to higher education without entering the military. You could see the same relationship now where we connect local housing justice fights to the FF15, i.e., you can't afford housing if you don't have a living wage. We could also build on the smaller sometimes isolated anti-racist struggles like families fighting against racist police murder of their children, to the need for young people of color to have access to jobs, etc. There are opportunities to connect the dots for people around more systematic class demands that make working peoples lives better.

The questions for us are: how do we build continuity of the left in between elections, do we see elections as a place to amplify the smaller struggles we are apart of, and do they provide left alternatives to the two party system? This is also tied to the question of left candidates emerging from real social movements, labor struggles etc. as opposed to candidate who isn't rooted in struggle in any way, but is a charismatic figure running for office. Planting the seeds for real left parties that are grounded in struggle must be an important component part of our longterm strategic thinking. There are glimpses of this with Jill Stein and the potential for a broader environmental movement, connected to labor, SCNCC, etc.

d. Freedom of criticism. All of this implies that, even when we enthusiastically support a left candidate, we retain our right to criticize or disagree with aspects of that campaign's policies or actions. This does not mean that our job is to shout "gotcha!" each time a candidate expresses a shade of disagreement with us. Normally, most of our time is spent defending left candidates from attacks by the Democratic Party and trying to use the best of what they say to show how the only way we can really win real reforms is by mobilizing social movements and class struggle. Yet, there are times when we must speak out publicly and clearly against a particular position. For example, in 2004, Nader accepted ballot status from the rump of the right-wing Reform Party in Texas after the Democrats managed to keep him off the ballot. We openly opposed this and argued it would be better to not be on the ballot at all in Texas than to be on the Reform line. However, we judged that the overall trajectory of the campaign still merited our support. Judging when and how to raise criticism is a tactical question, as is knowing when to endorse a campaign or to resign in protest if a candidate betrays the original platform we endorsed.

7. Potential Endorsements.

In the wake of Sawant's election, Socialist Alternative called for 100 independent candidates in 2014. This seems extremely unlikely on a national scale. In addition to the political obstacles (weaknesses of the left, etc.) there are practical challenges (there are no local elections in NYC in 2014). However, there are some concrete situations we should assess which may well lead to significant campaigns this year.

Chicago CTU: CTU's plans require further discussion beyond the scope of this document (see <http://socialistworker.org/2014/01/14/declaring-independence-in-chicago> Marilena M in SW, "Declaring Independence in Chicago"), but there are two immediate developments to consider.

Tim Meegan, high school social studies teacher and respected rank and file leader in the Chicago Teachers Union, is running for the City Council seat in Chicago's 33rd Ward. His campaign includes three main planks: fully funded public schools for all students; tax the rich and fund public services; and a \$15 minimum wage. Meegan, a socialist with no prior group/party affiliation, plans to run as an independent and shares our view of using the electoral arena as a vehicle for movement-building. The Chicago District plans to meet on February 5 to discuss proposals about supporting his campaign.

The **Chicago Socialist Campaign** is a new initiative in the city launched by a handful of different socialists, including members of Socialist Alternative and a few former members of the Chicago District of the ISO. The exact nature and vision of the campaign is still somewhat up in the air. There are certainly people who

see its development as a step toward launching an explicitly socialist (not green/labor/ect) race for political office, Sawant-style, but backed by a larger collection of forces or even perhaps the launching of a new organization. There are others with a looser and probably more interesting vision which would allow the CSC to be a point of convergence for a broader left which would support any genuine political break from the two-party system to the left as well as \$15/hour ballot initiatives. Calls for “left-unity” are commonplace but the development of a serious campaign of this nature could provide concrete examples of how and when such unity is practicable and may provide lessons for similar work in other cities.

Oakland: Long-time civil rights attorney Dan Siegel is running for mayor of Oakland and has the backing of several key unions (NUHW, SEIU Local 87) and important community and civil rights groups. While all the other candidates call for more police, Dan has earned a reputation as a fierce opponent of racist police brutality for his support of the Blueford family and many other victims. Dan has a history of participation in socialist organizations, but in groups which supported entrance into the Democratic Party (a la Bill Fletcher). In fact, two of three of Oakland’s last three mayors have been professed socialists at one point or another (Ron Dellums and Jean Quan). Thus, Dan’s decision to de-register from the Democratic Party and run as an independent is critical. Dan has a significant chance of winning and this has begun an important discussion in the Bay Area about how we differentiate between legislative candidates (like Sawant on city council) v. a potential executive (mayor) position. There is also an important question about what sort of room for action a left-wing mayor could have in the absence of new revenue (tax the rich) sources, which are extremely restricted by state law. Finally, there will also be a Green Party candidate and there is a potential for the two campaigns to work together in a collaborative manner.

Other races we may support, but which will most likely be symbolic protest votes: Green labor activist Howie Hawkins is running for Gov. of NY; independent radical Mike LaPointe is running for Congress in Everett; Peace and Freedom candidate Cindy Sheehan and Green Party Luis Rodriguez are both running for CA governor (although they will not be allowed to stand in the November election because of California’s reactionary “open primary” law); there may be a discussion in San Francisco about running socialist candidates in local elections; and there may be other candidates deserving of our support as a protest vote, even if they do not develop into dynamic campaigns.

8. Fight for 15 referendum. The other question to seriously consider is putting Fight for 15 on the ballot and supporting increases in the minimum wage. There are a number legal obstacles to this, but it is not out of the question and this might be a way to cross some significant bridges in terms of working with unions and post-occupy activists. These campaigns will encounter energized and well-funded opposition from business and will be very hard to win; not to mention difficult to defend even if passed by voters (see Seatac). So these campaigns will require significant backing, most likely from unions. Better to win in three or four places than to lose in 8 or 10. It’s much worse to lose and initiative like this than to have a radical protests candidate “lose” with 10% of the vote.

These campaign will also raise the question of compromises. While we support the Fight for 15 as a broad mobilizing goal, does this mean we automatically oppose any referendum which raises the minimum wage by less than that? That judgment cannot focus solely on the dollar amount and other benefits like COLA, sick leave, etc., but the size of the raise is not irrelevant. For instance, Obama’s promise to raise Federal workers’ wages to \$10.10 per hour is hardly likely to generate a wave of activist and worker enthusiasm, and there is a similar question about a potential \$10 campaign in Michigan.

Yet, if done right, these campaigns have the potential to bring in hundreds of volunteers, unite the best labor, student, occupy and community activists and address the realities of gender and racial inequality in the working class. They may absorb significant branch and district resources, especially in the signature collection efforts and in the closing 2 months of the campaign and GOTV. As such, the issue of balancing and integrating other areas of work will be critical for branches, districts and the ISO as a whole.

Seattle: the most important Fight for 15 campaign in the country will take place in Seattle. Depending on what the mayor and Democrats on the city council do, there will either be a credible compromise between those forces and Sawant (the outlines of which are difficult to judge at this point) or Sawant has committed

to a campaign to place a 15 Now initiative on the ballot in November 2014. One way or the other, this fight is shaping up to be a battle with business and the ISO in Seattle will enthusiastically support this effort.

Oakland: SEIU 1021, UFCW and UNITEHERE, in alliance with ACCE and EBASE (influential community/labor groups) are gathering 30,000 signatures to place a \$12.25 minimum wage with COLA and paid sick leave on the ballot in November 2014. The initial proposal was for \$11 and this provoked the beginnings of a debate in the ISO over whether this was sufficient and whether that amount would ignite any enthusiasm. Under the influence of Seattle and the enthusiasm of the Fight for 15 movement, the unions decided to raise the amount. The Bay Area ISO district voted nearly unanimously to support this at our last pre-convention meeting.

San Francisco and Berkeley: there is significant support in both these cities to place increases in the minimum wage on the ballot in November and there may be an anti-eviction initiative rising from a tenants' convention in the coming weeks in which SF comrades have played an active role. **San Diego:** comrades in SD are in the middle of the Fight for 15 campaign and are exploring the potential for a referendum there in alliance with community, labor and student groups. **Chicago:** there is a non-binding resolution on the ballot in November for Fight for 15. **Los Angeles:** the labor council is proposing to the city council to raise hotel workers wages to \$15. If that fails, there may be a ballot in LA.

9. Process for endorsement. This document seeks to raise comrades' sights for elections in 2014. We should be on the look out for opportunities this year and begin thinking how those activities will shape the terrain for 2016 and beyond in terms of practical alliances, working relationships and a potential increase in unity on the left. At the same time, the decision by the Steering Committee to establish the ISO Elections Committee aims at ensuring that we approach this work in a democratic and centralized manner. While this process should many times be initiated by branches or districts (national or regional candidates are obviously a different story), we are not a federalist organization and any local endorsement by an ISO branch reflects on the ISO nationally. Here is our proposed process for researching and deciding upon electoral initiatives.

A. If ISO branches believe there may be prospects for supporting or running independent, left-wing candidates (be they Greens, labor, independent activists, movement or socialists) and Fight for 15 initiatives, they should assign comrades to research this potential. This also applies to other potential referendum: marriage equality, immigrant rights, etc. One or two comrades in each branch which begins this research should be appointed to communicate their findings, ideas, questions, proposals to the ISO Elections Committee (IEC).

B. The IEC is responsible for considering this information and communicating it to the Steering Committee as an advisory subcommittee. Both the IEC and the SC may make recommendations to the local branch or district as to how to proceed.

C. Upon consultation with the IEC and the SC, the branch or district should organize a full discussion and vote as to what candidates or referendum to support and develop a concrete plan for the nature of that support. This support may range from a simple endorsement for a protest vote to the decision to run ISO members as candidates or make a Fight for 15 referendum the center of the branch's activity.

D. The IEC will work with the branches and districts in this process and communicate any endorsement decisions to the SC. No local branch or district endorsement will be considered official ISO policy until the SC has reviewed it and may not be made public until such time. The SC, as the political leadership of the ISO elected by our convention, has the right to challenge or veto any local endorsement.

Submitted by the ISO Elections Committee: Alan M, Danny K, Elizabeth S, Jason N, Lance S, Lauren F, Leela Y, Marilena M, Ragina J, Shaun H, Todd C

Please send questions and potential campaign initiatives and candidates to isoelectionscommittee@gmail.com
