

# Where's the Winter Palace?

## On the Marxist-Leninist Trend in the United States

### Preface

For the first time since the collapse of the New Communist Movement, socialism is again on the rise in the United States. New radicals, particularly from Occupy and #BlackLivesMatter, are for the first time articulating political expression and increasingly becoming critical of capitalism, white supremacy, and militarism. A self-professed socialist gained thousands or even millions of followers in his 2016 presidential campaign, and a social-democratic organization's ranks have swelled to the tens of thousands. In the wake of the Trump election victory, even more layers of new radicals are being drawn into the orbit of the Left. However, revolutionary Marxism remains marginal in terms of its popularity among the proletariat.

In a post-USSR world dominated by U.S. imperialism, we find ourselves at an impasse. We can continue to operate on the basis of outdated Cold War politics, or we can look forward and develop a new Marxism for our conjuncture.

The purpose of this blog is to facilitate dialogue between non-sectarian, anti-dogmatist Marxists to develop theory, strategy, and analysis. While we are based in the United States, we are internationalists, and thus do not want to limit this dialogue to our "home" country. Who are we? We're nobody. We simply wish to make our small contribution towards creating dialogue around strategy and theory.

While we have contributed the first essay, we are officially open for **submissions**. This blog has no "official political line," nor does publication of any piece imply wholesale endorsement by this blog's hosts. We wish to create an eclectic, pan-Marxist space for good-faith debate and discussion. As such, we are unlikely to publish articles wholly outside of the Marxist tradition. Additionally, we will not publish pieces that contain egregious chauvinism or argue in bad faith.

Submissions can be responses to articles on our site, original arguments, polemics, etc. There is no minimum word count, but we are looking to publish thoughtful, well-intentioned pieces that engage with the Marxist left in a constructive manner. While we are not opposed to publishing pieces of a theoretical nature, we are looking specifically for pieces that are grounded in concrete struggle and questions of strategy and tactics.

We hope that this blog can serve as a tool for further dialogue with the intention of building inroads between Marxists, socialists, and communists of various tendencies and traditions.

The goal of this particular essay is to provoke discussion on strategy and practice for the revolutionary left in the U.S. today, as well as to engage with the Marxist-Leninist trend

regarding what we believe to be its strengths and weaknesses. We welcome criticism, commentary, and general engagement with this essay in the spirit of comradely discussion.

## Introduction

In the United States today, there exists a political trend which describes itself as Marxist-Leninist. This trend is organized as a loose constellation, orbiting around organizations such as the [Workers World Party](#) (WWP) and the [Party for Socialism and Liberation](#) (PSL), and to a lesser extent the [Freedom Road Socialist Organization](#)-Fight Back (FRSO)<sup>1</sup>. Members of this trend associate in forums such as [r/communism](#) on Reddit, on Facebook in pages and groups such as [Bro, We Are Communist. Problem?](#) and [Karl Marx's Red Reading Room](#), and on Twitter. Though containing members of all generations<sup>2</sup>, this contemporary Marxist-Leninist trend has a particular character among millennials, including those in their early thirties or late twenties radicalized during the protests against the Iraq War or in the Occupy Movement, and younger members radicalized during Black Lives Matter or the election of Trump. The authors count ourselves among many others who politically “came of age” within this trend.

This trend is united in support of “Actually Existing Socialism” historically<sup>3</sup> and the continued centrality of the “Five Heads” of Marxism-Leninism (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao). They stress the importance of anti-imperialism to revolutionary practice in the “belly of the beast”, and additionally support for national liberation struggles historically and today as well as support for national bourgeois governments which are targeted by U.S. imperialism (e.g. Iran, Syria). This trend upholds Stalin against Trotsky, views Khrushchev as a revisionist, and supports the USSR’s interventions in ‘56 and ‘68. Social Democrats, anarchists, and others denigrate it as Stalinism and condemn its members as “tankies”. Those in the Maoist movement consider it to be revisionism.

The contemporary Marxist-Leninist trend views itself as the continuation of the world communist movement of the twentieth century, *including* the anti-imperialist struggles of the century more broadly. It proudly sees its own history as being that of the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, and the Cuban Revolution; in the U.S., its local heroes include the Black Panther Party, Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, and so on. Its study guides feature lots of Marx, Engels,

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<sup>1</sup> There is also the [Party of Communists USA](#) (PCUSA) and the [American Party of Labor](#) (APL), but they are much smaller organizations than the three named above.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that, due to the weakness of the communist movement from the mid-80s into the late 90s, there is a large generation gap in the U.S. communist movement.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. MLs generally define “actually existing” or “real” socialism as a lower stage of the communist mode of production. It is distinguished from capitalism by the ownership of the commanding heights of the economy by a workers’ state. It is distinguished from high communism by the continued existence of commodity production, remuneration based on work, and division of labor, such as between city and countryside or mental and manual labor. MLs tend to look to five countries as currently socialist: China, Cuba, DPRK, Vietnam, and Laos. There is the most agreement around Cuba being socialist and the most disagreement around China (and subsequently Vietnam and Laos). Most U.S. MLs consider the Eastern Bloc to have been socialist until the counter-revolutions of 1989-1991.

and Lenin, and to a lesser degree Stalin and Mao. Its propaganda features, for instance, Thomas Sankara, Fred Hampton, and Fidel Castro.

Stalin provides the canonical definition of Marxism-Leninism historically:

Leninism is Marxism of the era of imperialism and the proletarian revolution. To be more exact, Leninism is the theory and tactics of the proletarian revolution in general, the theory and tactics of the dictatorship of the proletariat in particular. Marx and Engels pursued their activities in the pre-revolutionary period, (we have the proletarian revolution in mind), when developed imperialism did not yet exist, in the period of the proletarians' preparation for revolution, in the period when the proletarian revolution was not yet an immediate practical inevitability.<sup>4</sup>

This is a major touchstone for contemporary MLs. Since imperialism still dominates and proletarian revolution is still the aim, ML is considered to be a still-applicable way of approaching politics. Dictatorship of the proletariat is still considered necessary, as is a vanguard party run along democratic centralist lines.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Appeal of Marxism-Leninism***

We believe there are several positive aspects of U.S. MLism that have drawn millennials into its orbit.

First, MLism, as a revolutionary trend, provides an alternative to the reformist wing of the nascent socialist movement led by the right wing of the DSA, the Jacobin milieu, and the movement around Bernie Sanders. New radicals who were unsatisfied by the prospects of social democracy or the Democratic Party have found a viable option in Marxism-Leninism, which explicitly calls for the total overthrow of the bourgeois State by any means necessary.

Second, MLism prides itself on organizational discipline. This aspect attracted a lot of militants to Leninism in the late 60s due to the disarray of loose New Left organizations such as the original Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). These activists came to realize that "structureless" or "non-hierarchical" formations often meant in practice the despotism of unelected, media-appointed leaders, combined with anti-democratic practices like the refusal of the minority (or worse, individuals) to bow to the decisions of the majority.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, post-Occupy radicals have turned to more disciplined organizational structures after participating in a movement without clearly defined organizational structures or articulated

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Stalin, [\*The Foundations of Leninism\*](#) (1924)

<sup>5</sup> "Dictatorship of the proletariat" is an idea originating in Marx that after the bourgeois State is dissolved, a proletarian apparatus of force is necessary to guide the transition to communism. We will discuss the party form later in the essay.

<sup>6</sup> See "[The Tyranny of Structurelessness](#)" by Jo Freeman, a highly influential feminist essay from the early 70s.

political goals. Organizational discipline has also appealed to ex-anarchists from the Seattle '99 tradition, some of whom have adopted Marxism-Leninism-Maoism and other Leninist trends.

Third, MLism is a trend known for its strong stance on national liberation and anti-imperialism. In the U.S. in particular, the early CPUSA was known for its commitment to Black liberation, especially through [organizing sharecroppers in Alabama](#) and placing an emphasis on Harry Haywood's "[Black Belt](#)" thesis, the idea that African-Americans constituted an oppressed nation within the United States. Today, the ML trend participates in popular anti-racist struggles, in particular #BlackLivesMatter as well as anti-imperialist struggles, particularly against U.S. wars in the Middle East. Today's ML groups largely call for self-determination for oppressed nations as well as the return of land to indigenous peoples. For many young militants, especially radicals of color, this focus on self-determination is a breath of fresh air compared to the class-reductionism that crops up in other U.S. leftist trends.

Fourth, Marxist-Leninists generally hold positive views of the 20th century socialist states. For those who wish to draw positive lessons from this experience, MLism presents an appealing alternative to the Cold War anti-communism often propagated by layers of the reformist, anarchist, and Trotskyist trends.

We have outlined how the Marxist-Leninist trend in the U.S. sees itself today, and how it presents itself to the broader Left. But as Marxists, we are not content with knowing how things present themselves to be; we seek to understand their real content. To that end, let us explore the contemporary practices of the political groups which are central to the contemporary ML trend in the U.S.: the WWP, PSL, and FRSO. How do the political convictions of MLs today play out in practice?

## Practice

### **WWP**

We will now shift temporarily into first person for Avery's account of their experience with WWP:

It is important to note that I was only with the organization for five months, and that I was never a full member. My analysis of WWP is based on my observations working both with the local branch as well as with party-wide efforts. While my particular branch was less organized than some others (Durham, NYC, and Detroit in particular), my experience provides sufficient material to draw conclusions about the weaknesses of the organization.

In practice, our WWP branch's work was entirely centered around attending and/or organizing street protests. We would show up at whatever demonstrations were going on, or sometimes we would hold our own. We would bring our own signs that expressed our own slogans, and on bad days we would show up with just the "usuals" (i.e. already-politicized 'activists'). When demonstrations had a more mass character, it was usually because the news caught the

attention of large layers of the class. In those cases, we would hand out as many newspapers as possible, with the vague goal of “recruiting” new members. We considered this approach justified, criticizing other activist groups as “weak on anti-racism/anti-imperialism” or “opportunist” for not organizing a 10-person demonstration in solidarity with Maduro.

To be absolutely clear, we did not *only* protest. We also held sign-making parties, planning meetings, educational panels/discussions, jail support etc. However, most of this work was *supplementary* and revolved around our focus on protesting. We would sometimes jump from issue to issue, but we would often focus our time organizing demonstrations with a small handful of particular groups. The only measurable goal was recruiting new members, not organizing the class or winning concrete reforms. It is possible that other branches were better at avoiding the “protest treadmill”, but my participation in multiple party conferences and communication with other branches did not indicate that our branch was an anomaly<sup>7</sup>.

Consider WWP’s call [for a global strike](#) for May Day 2017. Of course, a global strike would be nice, but it has nothing to do with reality when the Left remains scattered, marginal, and with virtually no deep ties to the class. The global strike campaign was conceived as a propaganda tool to inspire the class to take more militant action, rather than the strike itself being a concrete objective. In practice calling for a global strike meant showing up with “global strike” signs at May Day protests without actually building any mass base in the class. The campaign was a perfect demonstration of the phrase “left in form, right in essence.” Despite the ultra-left phraseology of “Global May Day Strike”, in practice our campaign placed us objectively to the right by failing to organize a mass base.

Without a proper mass base to ground our activity, we oscillated between left adventurism and rightism, often embodying both simultaneously. While our slogans were quite “leftist”, our focus on protesting and the “activist milieu” was decidedly rightist. We would attend demos held by other groups that were routinely met with beatings and arrests. Of course, repression is always the fault of the police, but it was unclear why we were putting ourselves at risk, beyond moralizing about “struggle” and “going into the streets”. These actions were not pieces of a larger strategy, but were done for their own sake, without reflection as to our goals.

Unfortunately, there is no structure for self-reflection within WWP. For example, in our branch, we organized a contingent for a larger May Day protest demanding rights for immigrants. Our language around the protest was heavily based on “defense” of immigrants, but it was unclear what this meant materially. Leading up to May Day, our main tactic was heavy flyer-ing to try to draw people to the demonstration. The turnout for our contingent ended up being virtually just us and our immediate allies (whom we outnumbered greatly). However, we could not evaluate whether or not this was a success or a failure because we did not have any explicit strategy or measurable goals for May Day beyond propagating a view to the left of the Democratic Party.

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<sup>7</sup> A notable exception was the Detroit branch’s organization of an anti-fascist “People’s Defense Network”. Regardless of its effectiveness, it does potentially mark a break from protest-centered organizing in favor of building deeper ties with the class.

There was a lack of self-reflection on whether the campaign actually inspired workers to militancy, a goal not easily measured. WWP First Secretary Larry Holmes reflected on the campaign in [a speech](#) at the November 2017 Party conference:

We had great hopes for May Day 2017. We put out a call for a global general strike, which even though that didn't happen, it still was a good idea. It did seem as though the fear — coming from Trump, ICE, the police, the bourgeoisie — may have been a factor in keeping some of the immigrants from coming out, understandably so.

There are a couple of apparent issues with this evaluation. First, it places the onus on (a particularly vulnerable layer of) the class itself to heed the calls made by a relatively small communist organization, rather than winning trust through building relationships and deep organizing. Second, it places primacy on “good ideas” disconnected from objective conditions. In short, this evaluation blames migrants for being too afraid to act on a “good idea”. While there was certainly enough self-awareness to know that our call for a general strike would not *actually* precipitate a general strike, we lacked the sobriety to recognize that this approach at best wasted our time and at worst made us look out of touch with reality. Lacking a measurable and realistic goal chosen as a tactical piece in a strategic puzzle, we ended the action with the same knowledge and forces as when we started.

In WWP, deeper discussions about strategy were sidelined by the constant work required to keep up with protests and “activist subculture” activities. There was a lack of prioritizing discussion of short-term and long-term goals, analysis of our juncture, or general strategy. Consider, for example, [WWP's program](#). Rather than a strategic or analytical document, it is simply a list of demands. While having a perfectly outlined strategy document for revolution is impossible, we feel that this program reflects the nature of WWP's concentration on protests, which simply raise demands. A more fleshed out program would address questions on the role of WWP in the broader movement and in party-building, strategic methods for organizing various layers of the class, and deep-organizing projects to focus on. However, our document suggested that these questions were either unimportant or already settled, and that we simply needed to bring our readymade ideas to the masses.<sup>8</sup>

In short, we restricted our struggle to the plane of ideas. Socialists win over workers by organizing alongside them to [improve material conditions and build institutional power](#), not by handing them newspapers or shouting ideas to them.

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, our focus on ideas over practice made our theory *also* suffer, as we did not take seriously the theoretical tasks ahead of us that would be required to bring Marxism into 2018. In other words, our dogmatism made our theory lifeless. For example, our understanding of women's oppression was based on decades-old theses from the New Left without engaging at all with the contributions of the Italian autonomists or Social Reproduction Theory.

Despite our lack of ties with the class, WWP at least acknowledged the need for mass organization in the abstract, if only to produce new MLs. However, we relied on the International Action Center as our “mass organization”, which was in effect a [front group](#). By that I mean that the IAC membership mostly or in large part consisted of WWP members and toed the party-line of WWP. In public events, we would introduce ourselves as WWP or IAC depending on the occasion; it was more of a hat that we put on than a genuine mass working-class organization. Our conception of mass organization was as a way to funnel individual workers into revolutionary ideas.

But by keeping our mass organizations as *ours* rather than as heterogeneous formations with political contradictions, they remained marginal, unable to draw in broad layers of the class or foster a culture of healthy debate. And this was not simply a result of unfavorable conditions, but had been the case for decades. Max Elbaum describes something similar in his description of WWP’s work organizing “the first large-scale protest against the Reagan administration,” a “demonstration against intervention in El Salvador and austerity” which drew 100,000 to Washington, D.C.:

Through the 1960s and 1970s [WWP] focused on mobilizing contingents at street protests, conducting little or no base-building work in unions or communities of color. But in 1980-81 Workers World was able to step into an open space... The WWP-initiated People’s Antiwar Mobilization presented itself as a protest vehicle and gathered that energy into a successful national march.

Forging an ongoing coalition afterwards proved more difficult. Workers World tried to follow the march’s success by calling for a broad All People’s Congress (APC) but tried to monopolize decision-making power and the APC soon narrowed into what amounted to a small WWP front. The main lasting contribution of the May 1981 action turned out to be establishing the pattern of spring Washington demonstrations against Reaganism, and a whole series of big peace-and-justice actions followed during the next seven years.<sup>9</sup>

The vague, unstated strategy in WWP is that “party-building” consists in holding street demonstrations, slowly recruiting more people, until we reach some “critical mass”, at which point we would be ready for revolution. But despite organizing a hugely successful march, WWP was unable to capitalize on it and build any long-term mass base. To us, this raises deep doubts about the overall orientation towards protests in general, and about WWP’s practical work in particular..

The sect mentality typically sees the road ahead as one in which the sect (one’s own sect) will grow and grow, because it has the Correct Political Program, until it becomes a

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<sup>9</sup> Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, pg. 264-265. Elbaum was a participant in the New Communist Movement (which we discuss later) through *Line of March* and the Northern California Alliance. *Revolution in the Air* is the authoritative history of the New Communist Movement.

large sect, then a still larger sect, eventually a small mass party, then larger, etc., until it becomes large and massy enough to impose itself as the party of the working class in fact. But in two hundred years of socialist history, this has never actually happened, in spite of innumerable attempts.

— Hal Draper, "[Anatomy of the Micro-Sect](#)" (1973)

## **PSL**

Neither of us have been members of PSL or FRSO, and thus cannot give as detailed an evaluation as we have with WWP. However, based on our observations and experience working with these groups, our sense is that they are better organized but still fall into at least some of the same traps of WWP.

Perhaps we can get a glimpse of PSL through their [program](#). The PSL program is mostly concerned with the state of U.S. capitalism, the need for a multinational Party, and the features of a future socialist government (the latter of which takes up almost half of the entire program). It proclaims the necessity of a revolutionary socialist party but it does not provide elaboration on what such a party should look like or how it is to be built. There is analysis of the current state of U.S. capitalism, and a blueprint for a future socialist society, but how do we get from Point A to Point B? The *entire realm of strategy* is skipped over. We do not feel that this document grapples sufficiently with the strategy and tactics needed to forge a path forward in our juncture. This is a major, yet unacknowledged, weakness among today's ML groups.

While we can only give our impressions, we believe that PSL, while more organized than WWP, falls into the same "activist subculture" mindset, focused on street protests and agitation rather than deep organizing projects. We attended the [People's Congress of Resistance](#) (PCoR) back in September 2017, organized by PSL as an attempt at building a mass organization that was capable of providing anti-Trump resistance independent from co-option by the Democratic Party. As the "[Vision for a People's Congress](#)" states:

[The PCoR] will chart a path of nationwide grassroots resistance and mobilization to defeat Trump's reactionary program of unrestrained capitalism. This path will draw on the experiences of the grassroots, amplifying the voices and spreading the tactics of those who are already fighting back to defend their communities.

The People's Congress of Resistance will also project its own platform and vision of what America should be if it is to be a society truly devoted to fundamental social and political rights. That is a society that places political and economic power in the hands of "We, The People" rather than the plutocrats. Each individual needs not just the right to vote for politicians who serve the rich, but the rights to a job or basic income, health care, housing and education.

The actual purpose of PCoR is a bit unclear, but based on this document it seems to be to (1) bring together multiple movements, in a sort of “movement of movements” and (2) propagate a political platform. These goals do make some amount of sense. The first would aim to rectify our current weakness by crafting a more immediately powerful coalition or united front out of already existing activist organizations, which taken all together do represent something of a power. And the second would address the urgent need to articulate and propagate an alternative vision for society, against the idea that capitalism is the only possible system which has been dominant since the end of the Cold War. But in practice, we believe PCoR fell short. Rather than bringing together various groups of activists to work on common projects, in practice PCoR attempted to conjure up its movement of movements through propaganda without a practical basis for coalition.

The PCoR convention was two days. The first day consisted mostly of speeches and breakout groups. These speeches were mostly of a political rather than strategic nature; they were focused on the evils of U.S. capitalism and the need for militant resistance with less emphasis on how to build such a resistance. In the breakout groups there was discussion around tactics used by the constituent groups, but not as much around what our plan forward would be. Overall, while the list of speakers was inspiring, we left with little besides inspiration. And though many of the breakout groups featured interesting presenters and were oriented towards worthwhile tasks, such as building an alternative media hub, there was little measurable progress made towards these goals (nor a plan to move forward), which were taken up in the abstract rather than concretely. Without a clear goal, the discussions drifted towards the sharing of anecdotes, frustrating some in attendance.

The second day was focused on passing resolutions. There were two types of resolutions: action-oriented and organizational. For those frustrated by the lack of tangible progress on the first day, this promised to be more rewarding. The action-oriented resolutions were written by various attendees, submitted to the organizers of the event, and passed by a verbal vote of the entire conference. These resolutions all more or less consisted in deciding that the PCoR stand in solidarity with various (largely protest-based) movements. While we were, of course, happy to state our solidarity, we again lacked clear or measurable goals or even first steps towards *action*. In similar fashion to the WWP program, these action-oriented resolutions were more demands than actionable steps towards building a united front. The focus fell more on protests and conferences than on deep organizing projects. It was fitting that PCoR ended with a march to the White House, demonstrating its emphasis on fleeting moments of expression.

After the action-oriented resolutions, we moved on to organizational resolutions. The organizational resolutions had been pre-written by the convening organizations, and were again passed by verbal vote of the entire conference.<sup>10</sup> These resolutions focused on growing the congress and spreading its ideas:

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<sup>10</sup> ["Inaugural People's Congress of Resistance draws together grassroots leaders unified by a revolutionary vision"](#)

The People's Congress of Resistance convening organizations committed to 1) a mass popular education campaign to spread the Manifesto; 2) developing a People's Congress of Resistance media hub drawing on the exciting and dynamic media-making already underway; 3) holding report meetings from the inaugural event that could be the launching pad for continued local and regional events; 4) a process for other groups to be added to the Conveners Committee; and 5) the publication of the resolutions, photos and videos of the inaugural event.<sup>11</sup>

Out of the above organizational resolutions, PCoR's primary strategy going forward seems to be to spread its [manifesto](#). Since the congress, PCoR's main activity in local areas has been to host reading groups around the manifesto, and to host trainings for its organizers to prepare them to host such reading groups. Rather than developing a strategy for building roots in a mass base, PCoR seeks to grow through propaganda, placing primacy on its program and hoping that it will win the day. Like WWP's Global May Day Strike, the strategy is to spread ideas instead of concretely organizing within the class. In its basic features, PCoR's strategy seems to be inspired by the success of the Labour Party's 2017 manifesto, even down to the name "Society for the Many," a direct reference to the framing used by the Labour Party. But as much as we may wish, PCoR is *not* the Labour Party, which *already* has a mass base. Our strategy at this juncture must focus on how to build our own mass base through genuine long term organizing; we cannot hope for our manifesto to light a sudden spark.

In summary, we left PCoR unclear what had been accomplished, and feeling that we lacked clear goals going forward. There was little discussion around strategy and the purpose of the congress, and the organizational democracy that existed was mostly cosmetic. It did seem like the conveners of the conference had goals or a plan for the future, but as "participants" in the conference we felt more like audience members. Since the event itself, there have been some local report-backs and reading groups around the Manifesto in various cities, as well as a training centered around hosting these events. So far, there has been no mass response, nor does it seem that PCoR has achieved a practical unity between a broader layer of activist groups. In short, PSL's major project in 2017 was more of a networking event for activists than an attempt to build a mass base in the unorganized. This failure mirrors WWP's attempt to ignite a spark with a big protest, thereby skipping over the hard work of base-building.

## **FRSO**

FRSO's party documents contain a fair bit more detail on strategy compared to those of WWP and PSL. For example, their document "[Class in the U.S. and Our Strategy for Revolution](#)" details the class composition of the United States, the need to build a communist party, and the need for a "strategic alliance" between the working class and the oppressed nations. Another example, their [7th Congress documents](#), detail an analysis of the U.S. economy and political

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

sphere while proposing strategy for working within the various movements as well as within the unions. This is a clear step above the WWP and PSL programs, which do not discuss strategy or the need to *build* a party *that does not yet exist*. In this vein, we also see FRSO's self-identification as a "pre-party formation" rather than a party to be a positive thing.

In practice, it does seem that FRSO is more concerned with base-building than WWP in that their cadre focus on specific areas of work, dedicating their time and energy into certain mass struggles instead of jumping around to different protests. They have many members in unions, national liberation struggles, the student movement, and other areas. We see this as an improvement of the protest-centric model practiced by WWP. However, we still have hesitations about FRSO's organizational structure, which we will discuss later.

We have tried to paint an accurate picture of the practice of modern U.S. ML organizations, including their weaknesses. We have identified several key errors including overemphasis on protesting, failure to conduct base-building work, and the placement of political line above material organizing. These problems flow from the idea that a small group of people can create a political line and win the class over to it, rather than building a program *with* the class through mass struggle. We feel that these issues are not sufficiently discussed among the ML milieu because they praise these organizations for their political line rather than their practice.

We have explored the ML trend in its strengths as well as what we believe are its weaknesses in practice. But we have yet to discuss the primary distinction between ML groups and all others: their organizational form, the democratic centralist cadre Party. What does this form consist of, and is it a proper organizational form for our period?

## Party Of An Old Type

"Polly Parks, once associated with the magazine *Theoretical Review*, maintains, 'I don't think there is such a thing as the Leninist party.' She argues that activists in the party-building movement were fixated only on 'the nature of how the Bolsheviks operated in a revolutionary situation in Russia.' Val Moghadam, a former leader in the Iranian Students Association, adds, 'People did a selective, one-sided and superficial reading of Lenin's work. Certain texts were picked up on. They were seized as absolute truth and not looked at in their historical development.' She states that '*What Is To Be Done?*'—the bible of the party-building movement—'wasn't seen as a specific conjunctural work' advocating a particular form of organization for a specific situation."

— John Trinkl, [Not the time for a Leninist party?](#) (1985)

Organizationally, U.S. ML groups operate along "democratic centralist" lines. The shorthand definition of "demcen" is often given as "freedom of discussion, unity of action." In other words, full discussion is permitted on an issue, but once it is voted on, the minority must submit to the majority in carrying out the voted-on plan.

Democratic centralism, as practiced today, implies more than this simple formulation. For U.S. MLs, it means mimicking the organizational structure of the Comintern<sup>12</sup> groups. There are no factions allowed, “party line” cannot be disagreed with publicly, and lower bodies submit to higher bodies.

How does this practice of “democratic centralism” measure up with historical Leninism? The common mythology would suggest that these practices were integral to the Bolshevik tendency since its foundation in 1902. But as Albert Szymanski explained, the road to building a revolutionary working-class Party in Russia was quite arduous. The “Leninist Party” as commonly understood today did not exist in Russia until around 1921:

Until 1902 (well along in the history of revolutionary process) there were many separate revolutionary organizations in existence. In the 1902-1912 period the unified Social Democratic Party was in fact a loose coalition of factions, the two most important of which were the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks. The considerable differences with the Mensheviks did not prevent the Bolshevik faction from staying in the same loose organization with them until five years before the final seizure of power. In the 1912-1920 period, the Bolshevik Party itself allowed organized factions to exist. It was notorious for breakdowns in discipline which included members of the central committee leaking the date of the October Revolution to the bourgeois press as a means of stopping it (they remained leaders). Lenin himself on a number of occasions bucked the majority. The modern Leninist form of democratic centralism which forbids organized factions within the Party was not implemented until three years after the revolution, i.e., the Bolsheviks were able in fact to lead the revolution without a classical Leninist Party... Contrary to a prior assumption of all party building efforts of the 1970s, the Bolsheviks did not start with a disciplined party, then build the revolutionary movement. Quite the opposite. The disciplined party gradually evolved during the revolutionary process and its formation was not in fact complete until after the revolution.<sup>13</sup>

If Szymanski is correct in arguing that the Leninist party as we understand it today was not a practical reality during the Russian Revolution or the preceding period, it remains possible that the *idea* of the Leninist party had already been formalized, if not yet made reality. Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* was written as early as 1901, and has for decades been seen as the canonical text on the topic of the cadre party, a new type of organization made up of professional revolutionaries. But according to Hal Draper, to understand *WITBD?* in this way is to absorb a popular anti-communist misreading of the text. His core argument in [The Myth of Lenin’s “Concept of The Party”](#) is as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> The Third (Communist) International (or “Comintern”) was the international organization of communist parties that arose out of the collapse of the Second International. It existed from 1919 until 1943, and consisted of communist parties across the world with hundreds of thousands to millions of members.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Szymanski, [“The New Communist Movement: An Obituary”](#) (1981)

The reader of Lenin's *WITBD* must understand that if it embodied some specially Leninist "concept of the party" *Lenin himself was entirely unaware of it* at the time. *He* thought he was putting forward a view of party and movement that was the same as that of the best parties of the International, particularly the German party under the leadership of August Bebel – only allowing for the big difference that the Russian movement faced the special problems of illegality under an autocracy. [emphasis original]

Draper presents a compelling case that *WITBD* was in fact highly contingent upon the conditions of illegality at the time in Tsarist Russia, rather than being a universal statement on a "party of a new type." His fairly straightforward exegesis of *WITBD* and Lenin's later comments on the text provide helpful debunkings of anti-Leninist clichés: the myth of the leading role given to intellectuals by Lenin (actually taken from Kautsky and in practice much more true among the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, and consistently criticized by Lenin), or that Lenin wanted a party of only full time, thus not working-class, professional revolutionaries (whereas Lenin meant by "professional" only that they would be dedicated, trained activists who spent a great deal of their free time doing revolutionary activity). On this point about professional revolutionaries, Draper also argues against the traditional Leninist understanding, saying that Lenin was aware that only the core of the party could be trained activists, and that furthermore his argument in support of this activist core was specific to the context of illegality. In that context, it was important that the party be kept alive by a consistent core of activists, so that the constant eradication of the party through arrest and exile could be evaded. Furthermore, the Russian Social-Democratic party at that point hardly existed, and it would take dedicated work to craft its organizations and bring a national party center into being. Once conditions of legality were achieved in 1905, however, Draper argues that Lenin changed his line:

All comrades, [Lenin] enjoined, must "devise *new* forms of organization" to take in an influx of workers, new forms that were "definitely much broader" than the old, "less rigid. more 'free,' more 'loose.'" [...] He seized on the new conditions especially to advocate that mass recruitment of workers (possible for the first time) should swamp over the influence of intellectuals in the party work.

Given the instability of the idea of "cadre party" as an idea in Lenin, it becomes necessary to trace the history of the term "democratic centralism" within the RSDLP. According to Lars T. Lih, the term "democratic centralism" was actually introduced by the *Mensheviks* in 1905<sup>14</sup>. The political freedom won during the 1905 revolution allowed the RSDLP to increase their internal democracy, in particular the selection of party leaders through elections. Bolsheviks and Mensheviks alike agreed upon increasing party democracy given the newly won freedoms. But with few exceptions, Lenin only used the term "democratic centralism" during 1906-07 and 1920-21."In each of these two periods, Lenin's use of the term was triggered by groups to which he was opposed: by the Mensheviks in 1906-07 and the Democratic Centralist group headed by

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<sup>14</sup> Lars T. Lih, "[Democratic centralism: Fortunes of a formula](#)", *The Weekly Worker*

N Osinsky and others in 1920. In neither period do we find any systematic exposition of the meaning of the term.”<sup>15</sup>

Let us explore one instance of Lenin’s use of “democratic centralism” and see how it compares to the modern ML conception. In May 1906, the Central Committee (CC) of the RSDLP sent out a communication that stated that in the Party press and meetings, “everybody must be allowed full freedom to express his personal opinions and to advocate his individual views”. However, in *public* meetings, Party members “should refrain from conducting agitation that runs counter to congress decisions” and should not “call for action that runs counter to congress decisions, or propose resolutions that are out of harmony with congress decisions.” This more or less maps onto the modern ML understanding of “demcen”, that disagreements should be reserved for internal meetings. Let us see Lenin’s response. We find it necessary to quote him at length:

Those who drafted the resolution have a totally wrong conception of the relationship between *freedom to criticise* within the Party and the Party’s *unity of action*. Criticism within the limits of the *principles* of the Party Programme must be quite free..., not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings. Such criticism, or such “agitation” (for criticism is inseparable from agitation) cannot be prohibited. The Party’s political action must be united. No “calls” that violate the unity of definite actions can be tolerated either at public meetings, or at Party meetings, or in the Party press.

Obviously, the Central Committee has defined freedom to criticise inaccurately and too narrowly, and unity of action inaccurately and too broadly.

Let us take an example. The Congress decided that the Party should take part in the Duma elections. Taking part in elections is a very definite action. During the elections (as in Baku today, for example), no member of the Party *anywhere* has any right whatever to call upon the people to *abstain from voting*; nor can “criticism” of the decision to take part in the elections be tolerated during this period, for it would in fact jeopardise success in the election campaign. *Before* elections have been announced, however, Party members *everywhere* have a perfect right to *criticise* the decision to take part in elections. Of course, the application of this principle in practice will sometimes give rise to disputes and misunderstandings; but *only* on the basis of *this* principle can *all* disputes and all misunderstandings be settled honourably for the Party. The resolution of the Central Committee, however, creates an impossible situation.

The Central Committee’s resolution is essentially wrong and *runs counter to the Party Rules*. The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organisations implies universal and full *freedom to criticise*, so long as this does not disturb the unity of

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

*a definite action*; it rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult the unity of an action decided on by the Party.<sup>16</sup> [emphasis original]

A few observations must be made here. First, Lenin is advocating that public criticism of party line should be allowed, *as long as it does not impede carrying out actions*. According to Lenin, a party member should be free to publicly disagree with the decision to take part in the Duma elections *before or after* the elections. This makes sense to us; if a party member is going around telling people to boycott the election, this undermines the party efforts, which in turn makes it more difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of participating in the Duma.

Second, the example Lenin gives is tied to *immediately relevant practical work*. Today's ML groups take "unity of action" to be public agreement on not just organizing work, but also, for example, whether or not the USSR was socialist, or if the Syrian government deserves support. Imagine if the RSDLP had a united public party line on the French Revolution! And further, this CC declaration, which lines up with the modern ML understanding of "demcen", was actually passed by a Menshevik-majority CC!<sup>17</sup> In short, this passage demonstrates that a reading of today's ML "democratic centralist" practices onto Lenin has a weak textual basis.

Lenin picks up this term again during 1920-21, when the RSFSR was facing civil war against the White Army and the CPSU was riddled with heavy internal conflict. This is when the practice of "democratic centralism" as understood today was fully utilized for the first time. Lenin uses the term to emphasize *centralism* as a necessary strategy in the context of civil war. Lih concludes:

[T]he common supposition that Lenin had a particular organisational philosophy called 'democratic centralism' that was distinct or essential to Bolshevism is something of a myth. In the pre-revolutionary years, the term was certainly never associated with the vision of a monolithic, non-factional 'party of a new type' that (in Zinoviev's words) was "cast from one mould". In the post-revolutionary years, the Bolsheviks did indeed become a party of a new type, since they were faced with a new and completely unprecedented challenge of running the Russian state.<sup>18</sup>

Lih's argument is thus that the "democratic centralist vanguard" as an organizational form did not come into being until 1921, four years *after* the revolution and as a product of the period of civil war. This raises the question: is the "democratic centralist" cadre Party an appropriate form in a different contexts? Let us see what some of the canonical texts on this organizational form have to say on this question.

First, let's consider [Chapter VIII: The Party](#) from Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*. In the very first sentence of the chapter, Stalin expresses that "under [non-revolutionary] conditions the

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<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Lenin, "[Freedom to Criticise and Unity of Action](#)" (1906)

<sup>17</sup> At the 4th Congress of the RSDLP in April 1906, a new Central Committee was elected which consisted of three Bolsheviks and seven Mensheviks.

<sup>18</sup> Lars T. Lih, "[Democratic centralism: Fortunes of a formula](#)", *The Weekly Worker*

Party neither had nor could have had that great and decisive importance which it acquired afterwards, under conditions of open revolutionary clashes.” We are decidedly not in a period of “open revolutionary clashes” in the U.S. in 2018.

Stalin argues for “the necessity for a new party, a militant party, a revolutionary party, one bold enough to lead the proletarians in the struggle for power, sufficiently experienced to find its bearings amidst the complex conditions of a revolutionary situation, and sufficiently flexible to steer clear of all submerged rocks in the path to its goal.” His rationale for this new organizational form is that the struggle had entered a new period “of open class collisions, of revolutionary action by the proletariat, of proletarian revolution, a period when forces are being directly mustered for the overthrow of imperialism and the seizure of power by the proletariat.”

Again, these are not the conditions that we face. Further on in the chapter, Stalin characterizes “the Party as the embodiment of unity of will, unity incompatible with the existence of factions.” This is one of the more controversial features of “democratic centralism” as practiced by groups like PSL and FRSO. Stalin justifies his point with the following quote from Lenin:

In the present epoch of *acute civil war*, the Communist Party will be able to perform its duty only if it is organised in the most centralised manner, if iron discipline bordering on military discipline prevails in it... [emphasis added]

Whether or not this organizational form can extend beyond these conditions of “acute civil war” is up for debate, but was not being asserted as such by either Lenin or Stalin.

Moreover, let us consider what the official [terms of admission](#) (known as the “21 Conditions”) into the Comintern had to say about organizational structure:

13. Parties belonging to the Communist International must be organised on the principle of democratic centralism. In this period of *acute civil war*, the Communist parties can perform their duty only if they are organised in a most centralised manner, are marked by an iron discipline bordering on military discipline, and have strong and authoritative party centres invested with wide powers and enjoying the unanimous confidence of the membership. [emphasis added]

Again, “acute civil war” is listed as the justification of highly centralized bodies of authority and a ban on factions. Whether or not the ban on factions in 1921 was justified is outside the scope of this paper. But it has been sufficiently argued that the arguments put forth by the Comintern were based on their own historical circumstances of the Russian Civil War and anticipated revolutionary upheavals in Western Europe. We cannot underestimate the impact the context of those revolutionary years had on the Comintern parties. They *needed* highly centralized organizations that could lead insurrection and military struggle, and they needed them to come into being very quickly. During the Second World Congress of the Comintern, held from

July-August of 1920 and at which the above terms of admission were adopted, “acute civil war” was a reality, not lofty or theoretical phrasing:

The decisions of the congress were of fundamental importance. In an important sense, this was the real founding congress. It took place at the height of the war between revolutionary Russia and Poland, when the Red Army was nearing Warsaw. In Germany, the right-wing attempt to establish a military dictatorship, the Kapp Putsch, had just been defeated by mass working-class action. In Italy, the factory occupations were about to begin. The mood of revolutionary optimism was stronger than ever.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, these practices were put into place by very large organizations even outside of Russia, not small groups with a few hundred people like the U.S. ML organizations. Right after the Second Congress of the Comintern, the German Communist Party grew to 350,000 members after merging with the left wing of the Independent Social Democratic Party. The newly formed French Communist Party started with 150,000 members. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia claimed 170,000 members. By contrast, no U.S. ML organization today comes close to passing a thousand members, by our estimation<sup>20</sup>.

In summary, we believe the practice of “democratic centralism” within modern ML groups in the U.S. to be disconnected with real conditions. We do not face a revolutionary period of acute civil war as described by the Second Congress of the Comintern or by Stalin, who both emphasize that context as the justification for the pseudo-military organization of the party. Furthermore, historical example demonstrates that a tightly disciplined democratic centralist party is not necessary to carry out revolution, as there was not one present during, for example, the Russian Revolution, or the Cuban Revolution. Finally, we believe the textual foundations for contemporary democratic centralism in Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?*, which became a bible of the party building movement of the 70s and remains so today, to be based on a misreading of the text that ignores the context of the debates raging within Social Democracy during the early 20th century.

## Dogmatism and “Line”

As Marxists (and avid students of Lenin), we have a generally more favorable view of ML “political line” than that of social democracy or anarchism. By “political line”, we mean the ML theoretical framework and historical analysis, such as its conception of the State, view on national oppression, appraisal of which countries are socialist, etc. However, we must consider the significance of “line” in the context of the organizational and strategic shortcomings we outlined above.

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<sup>19</sup> Duncan Hallas, [The Comintern](#) (1985)

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, r/communism’s membership exceeds 40,000, and that of Karl Marx’s Red Reading Room exceeds 10,000. While many of these members are not in the U.S., and not all of them would necessarily identify with Marxism-Leninism, it demonstrates that the U.S. ML trend extends far beyond the three core organizations, whose total membership certainly does not exceed 2,000.

The correctness or otherwise of the ideological and political line decides everything. When the Party's line is correct, then everything will come its way. If it has no followers, then it can have followers; if it has no guns, then it can have guns; if it has no political power, then it can have political power. If its line is not correct, even what it has it may lose. The line is a net rope. When it is pulled, the whole net opens out.

— Mao Zedong, [Talks With Responsible Comrades At Various Places During Provincial Tour](#) (1971)

With this dictum, New Communist Movement radicals felt they were given *carte blanche* to place absolute emphasis on their “party line” and their ideas, fuelling sectarian hostilities between groups. It became a rallying cry, “quoted endlessly” by the dogmatist party-building efforts of the NCM<sup>21</sup>. This hyper-focus on “line” has not died out with time.

An emphasis on line and on certain historical positions is central to the way that today's ML groups practice democratic centralism. “Freedom of discussion, unity of action” has a different meaning if we, like today's ML groups, apply it not just to strategy and tactics, but foremost to ideas and “positions”. In this context, “freedom of discussion” means freedom to debate about which ideas are the correct ideas, and “unity of action” must necessarily mean that once the debate is had, everyone must agree to the same ideas. This was a common practice during the NCM:

[M]ost groups gave high priority to consolidating the membership around the organization's line. After a group passed through its formative stage, its leaders typically monitored every nuance of base activists' views. When they noticed a member with differing opinions, it was not uncommon to make detailed plans for dinners, informal late night chats and, if necessary, full-blown struggle sessions to bring that person into line. Largely through such means a stress on unity of thought and not simply unity in action became dominant. This was not written down in official documents, which mostly repeated formulas about individuals' right to argue for dissenting views as long as they followed proper channels and maintained unity in action. But after a few free-wheeling years, such flexibility existed mostly on paper. Dissenters were either brought into line, pressured to quit, or expelled.<sup>22</sup>

Of course “unity of action” is required when carrying out a strategy or tactic; to do otherwise would be organizational self-sabotage. This sense of “unity of action” is understood by any group that attempts to carry out a democratically agreed upon action. But none of this implies that every member must have the same ideas or the same interpretation of the strategy. This is an idealist misunderstanding of the original formulation.

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<sup>21</sup> Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, pg. 157

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 177-178

Consolidating an organization around its political line, when coupled with the type of “democratic centralism” practiced by these groups, leads to unhelpful practices such as the prohibition of public disagreement on line. But what is the practical value in having to “keep quiet” on internal disagreements, *especially* on historical or international topics that have very little direct bearing on our practical tasks as it stands (such as whether China is socialist)? Or on relevant modern theoretical questions which do not have a definitive answer yet? We do not see the value in pretending to agree with an organization’s political line publicly. It may even be deceptive or dishonest in organizing spaces. Further, even if these positions turn out to be “correct”, it does not automatically follow that building organizational independence around them is strategic.

This method, and a hyper-focus on line in general, stifles discussion between comrades across organizational lines, leading to lack of openness to criticism and debate among MLs. When was the last time an ML paper published two opposing views or a comradely criticism of another group<sup>23</sup>? These things can and should be a healthy feature of the socialist ecosystem as we strive to get our bearings for the first time in decades. We believe that open dialogue not only with other MLs but with other trends entirely can only strengthen the socialist movement.

The consolidation of U.S. ML organizations around political line is directly related to their deficiencies in practice. In one sense, U.S. MLism is focused on “politics”: WWP, PSL, etc. are hailed primarily for their “political positions” with respect to historical and current events (who is socialist, who is worthy of support, etc.). In another sense, though, this approach is profoundly *apolitical*. It is apolitical in that it is defined by *ideas*, not *practice and strategy*. The [Marxist Theory of Knowledge](#) teaches us that *practice* is the sole criterion of truth. Not internal consistency, not logical proof. So what does it mean for a trend to be defined by its theory rather than its practice?

We believe the conception of “line” as an end in itself is detrimental to both theory *and* practice. Placing importance on “line” in this way severs theory from practice by suggesting that theory can be “correct” *without practice*. This is an impossibility, as the “correctness” of theory is defined foremost by its practical results. This focus on “line” is often justified by the idea that without “correct line”, an organization or movement will necessary degenerate into reformism or bourgeois ideology. However, we believe that the examples of the CPUSA in the 1940s and the rise of Eurocommunism suggest that having a rigid political line does not prevent degeneration. If there is any organizational form or political line that is immune from degeneration, we believe that it has yet to be discovered. Further, we believe that having good theory is not synonymous with having highly specific positions on historical questions.

More and more communists are being educated through the internet, whether that be through Twitter or [marxists.org](#). While having centuries of communist thought at one’s fingertips is no doubt a progressive development, this style of education, disconnected from practice, can have a negative effect on political education. Internet communists learn Leninism as a set of

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<sup>23</sup> Both common practices of the *Iskra* group.

“positions” on historical and modern events, or at worst, a set of dogmas and truisms. Then, new “converts” to MLism (or any other tendency) seek an “affinity group” (almost like a hobby club), and naturally look to WWP, PSL, and FRSO due to their “positions”. Strategy and tactics are rarely brought up in online communities, if at all; it is enough that they have the “correct line” on whether this or that country is socialist, or which forces are deserving of our support in certain conflicts, etc. It is taken as a given that joining the organization with the most similar positions as one’s own is the correct strategic move. We believe this lack of critical thought around what sort of political unity is necessary in this juncture fails to account for the nascent character of the socialist movement as well as the primacy of practice over ideology.

There is hardly ever any talk of strategy in these online circles, just events and political actors and whether they’re “good” or “bad”, whether we should “uphold” or “denounce” something. Not only is it an idealist way to think (because it’s disconnected from concrete struggle) but it’s also a moralistic one: if you don’t “uphold” Bashar al-Assad, you’re “no better than the State Department”, despite the fact that “uphold” in this context means little more than voicing support. The fact of the matter is that without mass organizational structure, we cannot do much of anything to materially support any actors in any international conflict. So the question of whether we should “support” the Syrian government, or the protesters in Iran, is just an intellectual exercise if it is disconnected from our concrete struggles. Not that we should not talk about these questions, but our emphasis should be on building working-class power at home so that our opinions even matter.

This type of behavior is a broader online trend of treating MLism (or any other leftist tendency) as an identity or aesthetic rather than a political worldview and methodology. This can in part be explained by internet culture, the cultivation of a personal “brand”, and the individualism rampant on social media. More broadly this conception of a sort of “fandom” of Marxism-Leninism is likely related to neo-liberalism’s ability to re-appropriate even the most well-intentioned radical sentiments.

In summary, the idea that U.S. MLism is superior to other tendencies due solely to its “line” is fundamentally flawed because it severs theory from practice and reduces Marxism into a set of opinions (or moral judgements) on historical and current events and actors. This approach empties Marxism of its revolutionary character as a guide to practical activity and instead turns it into an identity or dogma. This represents a failure to fully break from the liberal conception of politics as a list of personal opinions rather than a worldview that allows us to analyze and (more importantly) change the world. Given that, if we are honest, we do not yet have a “readymade” Marxism to simply “apply” to the United States in 2018, we feel that organizational independence around a specific tendency (in this case, Marxism-Leninism) is premature and stifles theoretical development. We believe it would be a positive development if the ML trend instead placed strategy and tactics within the larger movement at the center of its discourse.

## The Sect System

In the previous three sections, we (1) evaluated the practice of U.S. MLism (2) argued that its organizational forms are based on a dogmatic reading of the Bolshevik Party and (3) argued that “correct line” without mass organizing is illusory. Having explored what the ML trend is, we have to ask “why” – why did the trend come to be this way? We will begin by tracing the lineage of the three main ML groups in the U.S.

The PSL formed<sup>24</sup> through a split from WWP in 2004, though today they espouse a nearly identical political ideology: Marcyism. In the 1950s, Sam Marcy led a faction in the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) around the idea of “Global Class War”<sup>25</sup>. In this formulation, the world is increasingly polarized into two “class camps”: one of the imperialist bourgeoisie and the other of the global working class, the socialist countries, and the national liberation movements. Marcy’s faction eventually left the SWP in 1959 to form the Workers World Party. While WWP is much more sympathetic to the socialist countries and national liberation movements than the SWP or most Trotskyist groups, it originally maintained adherence to aspects of the basic Trotskyist framework such as transitional demands and anti-Stalinism. Although WWP does not have an official position on the Trotsky/Stalin question, most of the leadership are more partial towards Trotsky. However, both WWP and PSL self-identify as Marxist-Leninist.

FRSO comes from a completely different lineage: the New Communist Movement (NCM). The New Communist Movement was a Marxist-Leninist trend which dominated the revolutionary Left in the United States in the late-60s and the 70s<sup>26</sup>. It was composed largely of younger radicals (often former students) who were inspired by the Chinese, Cuban, and Vietnamese revolutions and who looked suspiciously upon the Soviet Union and its U.S. affiliate the CPUSA. The NCM formulated itself as being anti-revisionist along the lines of Mao Zedong Thought (MZT)<sup>27</sup>, and broadly viewed the Soviet Union as social-imperialist or as having restored capitalism. FRSO was formed in 1985 by the merger of the Proletarian Unity League and the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters, two organizations of the late NCM that generally adhered to Mao Zedong Thought. While FRSO today recognizes the USSR as a socialist country up until its collapse in 1991, the original party line upheld the restorationist thesis. Thus, FRSO’s lineage

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<sup>24</sup> See the 2004 [founding statement](#) of the PSL. The reasons for the split have never been fully elaborated on, but it seems to have been over organizational issues.

<sup>25</sup> See Sam Marcy’s [original formulation](#) within the SWP

<sup>26</sup> See *Revolution in the Air* by Mark Elbaum

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that MZT is distinct from what today we might call “Marxism-Leninism-Maoism” (MLM) or sometimes simply “Maoism.” Confusingly, adherents to MZT called themselves simply “Marxist-Leninists,” viewing themselves as part of an anti-revisionist camp headed by the Communist Party of China in opposition to the Soviet Union. This camp would later further produce Hoxhaim after the split between the Communist Party of China and the Party of Labour of Albania. But “MLM” as we understand it today is mainly the product of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM), in particular the Communist Party of Peru--Shining Path. It came into being in the 1980s and 90s and [conceives of itself as a third and higher stage of Marxism](#), making Marxism-Leninism obsolete. We believe that today’s Marxism-Leninism is highly constituted by MZT.

can be planted firmly within U.S. Maoism as practiced in the NCM. That being said, FRSO is critical of the sectarianism, dogmatism, and ultra-leftism that characterized much of the practice of the NCM.

MLism in the U.S. is seen as the continuation of a revolutionary tradition from Marx to Mao. In reality, instead of a coherent “Marxist-Leninist” trend, there is some amalgam of Marcyist Trotskyism and Mao Zedong Thought. What should be immediately apparent is that U.S. MLism is hardly the product of an unbroken torch-passing of Marxist thought; rather, it is a trend formed out of multiple lineages of U.S. communist organization, forged from the practice of the New Left up through the collapse of the socialist bloc. However, this history is often concealed by its adherents. Such was the case during the NCM:

[NCM Marxist-Leninists] accepted the notion that there was one and only one revolutionary tradition—and that there existed a single, genuine Marxism-Leninism that embodied its accumulated wisdom. They all believed that upholding their favored version of genuine Marxism-Leninism was the key to building a revolutionary movement. This established a never-ending quest for orthodoxy and a constant suspicion of heresy at the very center of the movement's outlook.

But this entire framework (shared—though with different post-1917 icons—by pro-Soviet communism and Trotskyism) is fatally flawed. The conditions of economic, political and social life are so marked by constant change - and the history of popular and revolutionary movements is simply too complex—for there to be one pure tradition embodying all essential truths. A great deal can be learned from previous left experience, and identification with the history of the revolutionary movement can be a great source of strength. The contributions of Marx and Lenin still shed light on the workings of capitalism and the process of social change. They stand out for their breadth of vision and insistence on linking theory, practical work, and organization-building in an internationalist project. But it is an unwarranted leap from there to belief in a single and true Marxist-Leninist doctrine with an unbroken revolutionary pedigree from 1848 to the present.<sup>28</sup>

What is today understood as MLism contains many analyses from its component parts (Marcyism, MZT) which are in tension with MLs' self-image as representative of the global communist tradition. For instance, while the ML trend today rejects the thesis that capitalism was restored by the Soviet Union itself, most of the anti-revisionist framework which grew out of exactly this thesis still stands, including the categorization of the CPSU and its client parties as “revisionist” after Khrushchev's “Secret Speech” in 1956 (or earlier). All of these positions, as well as the entire “five heads” tradition and the construction of a direct line from Marx to Mao, served originally as ideological justification for the Sino-Soviet Split. But considering the

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<sup>28</sup> Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, pg. 323-324

disastrous policies<sup>29</sup> of the Chinese Communist Party due to the split, as well as the fact that the Vietnamese and Cuban parties, among others, refused to adopt the Chinese orientation against the Soviet Union, it does not seem to be a given that we should accept the basic anti-revisionist framework, which is exactly what the contemporary ML trend does without even realizing.

It is mistaken for the ML trend in the U.S. to view itself as cut from the exact same cloth as current or historical self-described Marxist-Leninist parties across the world for purely ideological reasons. Despite the fact that U.S. MLs “uphold” the Cuban Communist Party, or Mao Zedong’s contributions, or the FARC, or the PFLP, it does not follow that U.S. MLs are a part of a united tradition with all of these groups<sup>30</sup>. As materialists, we must recognize that an organization or trend must be appraised by its practice, not by its own words or ideology. One cannot simply “identify with” a swath of historical Parties and inherit their success and credentials. We believe this trend of appealing to the authority of other movements and parties is an important way that U.S. MLism seeks to legitimize itself while concealing its actual history and practice.

We have argued that U.S. MLism is not some continuation of an unbroken, eternal, global tradition of Marxism-Leninism. Rather, it is a specific, historically contingent trend that encompasses a variety of lineages from U.S. Trotskyism to the Maoist NCM. In other words, “Marxism-Leninism” as used today is an abstraction that conceals its real content. And this real content allows us to explain its flawed practice. U.S. Trotskyists, as well as those who upheld the Mao Zedong Thought of the NCM, were always organized in *sects*. Hal Draper, who had direct experience with this phenomenon, defines a sect as follows:

A sect presents itself as the embodiment of the socialist movement, though it is a membership organization whose boundary is set more or less rigidly by the points in its political program rather than by its relation to the social struggle. In contrast, a working-class party is not simply an electoral organization but rather, whether electorally engaged or not, an organization which really is the political arm of decisive sectors of the working class, which politically reflects (or refracts) the working class in motion as it...

What characterizes the classic sect was best defined by Marx himself: it counterposes its sect criterion of programmatic points against the real movement of the workers in the class struggle, which may not measure up to its high demands. The touchstone of support (the “point d’honneur,” in Marx’s words) is conformity with the sect’s current shibboleths – whatever they may be, including programmatic points good in themselves. The approach pointed by Marx was different: without giving up or concealing one’s own

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<sup>29</sup> Including rapprochement with the U.S. and reactionary foreign policy in Angola, Chile, Iran, Egypt, Puerto Rico, Portugal, Sri Lanka, and Oman, all springing from the disastrous thesis that Soviet “social imperialism” was a greater danger than the U.S.

<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that even beyond the problem of simply “identifying with” a Marxist-Leninist tradition, the ideologies of the groups that MLs “uphold” are far more eclectic than they give credit for. Such ideologies include Juche, Mao Zedong Thought, Huey P. Newton’s intercommunalism, Deng Xiaoping Thought, Hoxhism, etc.

programmatic politics in the slightest degree, the real Marxist looks to the lines of struggle calculated to move decisive sectors of the class into action – into movement against the established powers of the system (state and bourgeoisie and their agents, including their labor lieutenants inside the workers' movement). And for Marx, it is this reality of social (class) collision which will work to elevate the class's consciousness to the level of the socialist movement's program.<sup>31</sup>

We believe our arguments suggest that U.S. Marxism-Leninism fits this definition. ML groups in the U.S. are defined primarily by and praised for their political program rather than their practice in organizing with the class. Programmatic standards are imposed onto the class instead of forged through struggle, as we saw when analyzing the protest strategy of WWP or PSL's use of PCoR. ML organizations cohere their membership around specific positions on historical and international events and actors, rather than on shared strategy of mobilizing and organizing various layers of the working class. Additionally, their dogmatic adherence to "democratic centralism" as well as their focus on protests and sloganeering in practice cements them on an ideological basis rather than a strategic one.

While groups like the [International Socialist Organization](#) (ISO) and [Socialist Alternative](#) on the one hand and the PSL and WWP on the other have very different political positions, we believe their similarities outweigh their differences. Both sets of groups focus a great deal of energy on "activist culture" and building their sect, while what separates them foremost is their signage at demonstrations and their newspapers.<sup>32</sup> What's more important, in our evaluation, is the ways in which groups engage with and organize the class in order to build working-class institutional power. In that sense, the ISO, WWP, RCP, etc. are united in their status as sects rather than genuine mass organizations.

U.S. Trotskyist, Marcyist, and New Communist Movement groups rarely developed a mass base or grew beyond a few hundred members, even if at times the prospects were favorable. Everything from their intense focus on political line to their mode of organization guaranteed that they would remain marginalized. They never matched the level of mass organization that the broader Communist movement did because they tried to force themselves into existence in a completely ahistorical and backwards way, thinking that the essence of Leninism consisted in the tightening of discipline caused by the Civil War and the prospect and actuality of international revolution. But for the Trotskyists, the Marcyists, and the anti-revisionists, all it created was sects of greater or smaller size. We must acknowledge the objective limitations imposed by the state of class struggle, including, but not limited to, state repression, popular anti-communism, concessions made by the ruling class, and global counter-revolution. However, we maintain that the errors of the 60s and 70s Left contributed greatly to its collapse.

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<sup>31</sup> Hal Draper, "[Anatomy of the Micro-Sect](#)" (1973)

<sup>32</sup> It is very telling that all of these groups trace their roots to the Socialist Workers Party. And besides ISO, SAIt, WWP, and PSL, the only other prominent communist groups draw their lineage from the NCM (FRSO and RCP). While the CPUSA still exists, it is largely ignored. So without the CPUSA, there is no direct organizational link in the U.S. to classical Marxism-Leninism.

Another relevant concept to help us understand U.S. MLism is what Max Elbaum called “miniaturized Leninism”:

[M]ost groups began to act as if adopting a certain set of principles meant being anointed by history or given the franchise as the proletarian vanguard.

The result was the rise to hegemony of a sort of Leninism in miniature. Leninist precepts were cited, but their meaning was drastically narrowed in scope and scale. Sixty-year-old polemics written as guidelines for a party of thousands to interact with a movement of millions were interpreted through the prism of how organizations of hundreds (or even dozens) should interact with movements of thousands (or less). The tendency toward mechanical formulas and organizational narrow-mindedness went from having a certain influence to becoming deeply entrenched. The movement's vision of a vanguard party was reduced to the model of a sect. Just when a dose of fresh thinking was needed to transcend the limits of the Stalin-Mao model and expand on the valuable insights in Lenin's thought, the movement's strongest groups headed in the exact opposite direction. Miniaturized Leninism was Leninist in form, but sterile in content.<sup>33</sup>

We believe that U.S. MLism also fits this concept. In particular, our earlier argument on the history of “democratic centralism” suggests that U.S. MLism is disconnected from its own history and that its project has been to attempt to operate like historical parties that (1) had much more of a mass character and (2) were undergoing direct military conflict. Elbaum's term also helps explain MLs' reliance on the “canonical texts”. Consider, for example, the [“Basic Marxism-Leninism study plan”](#). The guide contains several thousand pages of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, and one text by each Stalin and Mao. Not only does it exclude other Marxists from the era such as Gramsci, Luxemburg, and Lukács, but it also excludes more contemporary thinkers like Samir Amin or Etienne Balibar. On top of that, it consists solely of primary sources, providing no context for the highly specific debates that Lenin and Marx were engaging in. We do not believe this study guide to be an anomaly, but rather indicative of a wider trend of constructing an ML ‘canon’.

For another example, consider the U.S. ML designation of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao as the most important theorists of Marxism. At best, the “five heads” formulation downplays the contributions of other contemporary Marxists like Gramsci, Ho Chi Minh, and many others. At worst, these five figures are seen as a series of prophets that bring Pure Science down to the masses. It is often said that Bob Avakian of the RCP cult is not deserving of the “sixth head” position. But the problem is not that Avakian is a false prophet; the problem is that there are prophets at all.

### ***Can Marxism-Leninism be salvaged?***

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<sup>33</sup> Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, pg. 196

Let's briefly return to Stalin's definition of Leninism as Marxism in a definite historical period (that of imperialism and proletarian revolution). Broadly speaking, the world is still in the era of imperialism as Lenin defined it. However, since Stalin's formulation: the Eastern Bloc has collapsed, formal colonialism has largely been replaced with neo-colonialism, Keynesianism has been replaced with neo-liberalism, and the United States has emerged as the dominant imperialist power. Are we in the same period that Stalin speaks of? Certainly a lot has changed.

Beyond that, Stalin emphasizes that Marx and Engels were in a *pre-revolutionary period*. When Stalin was writing, the Soviet Union had just been established and capitalist crisis was on the horizon. Throughout the 1920s, the Comintern pursued a fairly "leftist" strategy, hoping for revolution to spread to more countries. Are we in a revolutionary period in the U.S. right now? Clearly not. One could perceive a revolutionary situation arising sometime in the next several decades, but it is hardly on the immediate agenda. It is clear that our time is very different from Stalin's. While "proletarian revolution" is still our goal in general, it is not constitutive of our current period in the way that it was for Stalin's, in that we are not in a period of major revolutionary upheaval.

Thus, we would argue that U.S. "Marxism-Leninism" is an historically contingent ideology rather than a modern iteration of Marxism fit for our time and place. However, that does not mean that we should throw the baby out with the bathwater. The successes and failures of 20th century socialist experiments have much to teach us moving forward, from how to organize unemployed workers to how to run a planned economy. Lenin is arguably the most important Marxist since Marx, and it would do us good to learn from him and the evolution of his thought, not a mythological, prophetic version of Lenin. While we should study and learn from Leninism, we should also study other trends: autonomism & operaismo, Marxist-feminism, pre-war social democracy, and all historical anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and feminist movements.

The deep-seated dogmatism of U.S. MLism has become a fetter on the development of a genuinely new and creative Marxism for our era. We are *not* suggesting a return to anarchism or social democracy. Nor are we suggesting a return to the young Marx, or the "true" Lenin, or what-have-you. We are not abandoning Marxism-Leninism for Cliffite Trotskyism, or council communism, or any other trend. Our goal is to *escape the sect system altogether*, of which the contemporary U.S. ML trend consists. Thus, we are in favor of abandoning U.S. "Marxism-Leninism" in favor of an ecumenical approach to Marxism, which includes the historical contributions of the communist movement in general.

## So what do we do?

This essay is not about "debunking" the political and historical analysis of U.S. MLs or Marxism-Leninism more broadly. Instead, it is one contribution towards a critique of MLism as a trend in the U.S. We still identify the need for an organization to bind various elements of the class and articulate a revolutionary content, but we do not think the way to do that is to set up

small, highly centralized organizations bound to a particular ideology or “brand” of Marxism. More than anything, because we take revolutionary politics seriously, we have no desire to repeat the failures of the New Communist Movement, and waste another generation making the same mistakes.

We do not have the answers, and we think the first step to finding them is to admit our ignorance. Tentatively though, we would argue that [base-building](#) is the primary task of our current juncture. Historically, social democracy and then the Communist movement based their support on the existing strong base of trade union organization. But today, trade unions are at a historic weak point. Without a mass base of working class institutions, we will not have the power or basis to build a revolutionary working-class party. This means building working-class infrastructure on all fronts: tenants unions and workers’ co-ops, but also institutions of culture, leisure, art, sport, etc. We must also engage with popular struggles such as BLM. In other words, we must build a proletarian civil society.

Building working-class infrastructure must go hand-in-hand with party-building. There are no shortcuts to building a Party; without doing the daily grind of organizing on a mass basis, we will never get there. For the immediate tasks at hand, we believe that a relatively lower level of political unity is needed than is practiced in most Marxist sects. We also believe that we cannot necessarily know ahead of time what organizational form will achieve revolution, as several historical examples demonstrate that revolution is not necessarily carried out by a single, centralized revolutionary vanguard:

The interrelationship between the growth of the Party and the revolutionary movement which occurred in Russia was not unique to that country. Other major twentieth century revolutions have been made without the leading role of a single classical Leninist Party. The Cuban Revolution is a major case in point. An essentially military organization (the 26th of July Movement) played the leading role in the seizure of power and (together with the Communist Party into which it merged) in the socialist transition. In El Salvador the revolutionary process in 1980-1981 was guided by a coalition of revolutionary groups all working together. Although the Communist Party played the primary role, the revolutionary transformations of most of Eastern Europe in the post-World War II period in fact occurred under the joint guidance of Communist and left socialist parties working in close coalition. Parties which as a rule merged after the seizure of power. It is thus a viable scenario that 2, 3 or 4 parties could grow up together each with a viable mass base (as in El Salvador) which merge (as in much of Eastern Europe) mostly after the seizure of power. It is also quite possible that revolutions in the West could be led by parties like Lenin’s, i.e., one with organized factions that doesn’t tighten up its democratic centralism until after the Revolution. Given both the failure of Lenin’s Party’s to lead a successful revolution in any advanced capitalist country other than

Czechoslovakia, and the abysmal failure of the New Communist Movement, these possibilities must be seriously considered by honest revolutionaries.<sup>34</sup>

We must keep this history in mind as we attempt to organize in ways that are most effective in our time and place.

For those in the Marxist-Leninist trend who have already joined organizations, our recommendation moving forward would be to place more of an emphasis on base-building rather than street protests and “activist networking”. We find it encouraging that some ML groups have already begun this work. For instance, New York City branch of PSL has opened the Justice Center en el Barrio, a community center where they hold fitness classes, open mics, and other programming. This space was also used to collect donations to be sent to Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, which should be considered a base-building activity given the majority of Puerto Ricans in East Harlem. The development of a “Justice Center” strategy within the rest of the PSL would likely be a positive development<sup>35</sup>. We would also like to see MLs engage in debates around strategy and tactics not just with other ML groups but also with other tendencies entirely.

For those who are currently unaffiliated with any organization, there are several options that we believe would be fruitful.

We are partial towards the [Marxist Center](#) milieu that prioritizes the base-building/dual-power strategy to build a new revolutionary socialist party. This informal, loose grouping of organizations (such as [Philly Socialists](#), [Communist Labor Party](#), [Red Bloom Communist Collective](#), [Austin Socialist Collective](#), and [Kentucky Workers League](#)) has its sights set on eventually building a countrywide socialist organization. Marxist Center groups focus on projects such as [tenants unions](#), ESL classes, community gardens, [community self-defense](#), and other base-building projects. The Marxist Center is perhaps the first new trend in U.S. Marxism since the 2008 financial collapse other than the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist revival.

Another movement that we believe everyone should be learning from is the [Malcolm X Grassroots Movement](#) (MXGM) and in particular [Cooperation Jackson](#). These organizations are building a multi-pronged grassroots movement in Jackson, Mississippi. Their efforts include a solidarity economy (focused on co-ops and sustainability) as well as a successful mayoral campaign with Chokwe Lumumba and then his son Chokwe Antar. Cooperation Jackson is a vibrant organization with [healthy internal struggle](#) and base-building activities with the Jackson working class. Cooperation Jackson, like the Marxist Center, can be considered part of the modern base-building trend.

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<sup>34</sup> Albert Szymanski, ["The New Communist Movement: An Obituary"](#) (1981)

<sup>35</sup> Encouragingly, PSL Philly is [opening](#) their own Center, where they will host free homework and SAT tutoring, political education, and assistance with government benefit applications.

We also think that Marxists can work productively in the [Democratic Socialists of America](#) (DSA). While the DSA was founded on the principles of Zionism and Democratic Party lobbyism, and to this day maintains a conservative old guard, we believe that the recent influx in membership upon the election of Trump has destabilized the old leadership and given the organization a more “massy” character, which may provide Marxists with the opportunity to expose new socialists to our ideas and methods of work. The organization currently has over thirty thousand members, of which at *least* twenty thousand have joined since the 2016 election<sup>36</sup>. Most new members are young and ideologically unformed; they don’t join DSA because they agree with “democratic socialism” intellectually, but because it’s a visible socialist organization with a growing political culture and an orientation towards local struggles. This situation is ideal for carrying out what Draper identifies as the primary steps towards cohering an organized revolutionary tendency around a political center:

1. [Create] *a body of doctrine*, a body of political literature expressing a unified kind of revolutionary socialism;
2. [Form] *cadres of party workers and militants* around this political core;
3. [Establish] its “kind of socialism” as *a presence in left politics, with its own physiognomy and name*.<sup>37</sup>

This work of organizing a revolutionary wing or tendency within DSA remains possible because the reformist wing, traditionally in power, has been overwhelmed by the massive influx of new members, most of whom are more receptive to radical ideas than the old guard. Additionally, the decentralized structure of DSA, in which local chapters have a high level of autonomy, makes it impossible for a reformist leadership at the national level to dictate the work of the entire organization. As long as the reformist tendency is not able to cohere, win hegemony over the majority of new members, and/or centralize organizational leadership so as to wholly direct the work of the organization, the formation of a revolutionary Marxist tendency within DSA remains not only possible, but urgently necessary<sup>38</sup>. Groups like [DSA Refoundation](#) and the [Communist Caucus](#), and prominent individuals like R.L. Stephens, are taking up this work, particularly attempting to shift DSA’s activity away from Democratic lobbying and towards more serious base-building as part of a revolutionary orientation.

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<sup>36</sup> While it is true that these are “on paper” membership numbers, and being counted as a DSA member requires only paying dues, it would be a mistake to think that these numbers represent a massive inflation of actual membership. What counts is that tens of thousands of people have taken steps (including paying dues!) to become part of a socialist organization; whether they are sufficiently mobilized and retained by DSA is a question of DSA’s effectiveness in “cadre formation.”

<sup>37</sup> Hal Draper, ["Toward a New Beginning -- On Another Road"](#) (1971). This is exactly the kind of strategy that *Jacobin Magazine* has already employed to grow its own influence within DSA.

<sup>38</sup> Radicalizing the DSA would not be a historical anomaly, either. Students for a Democratic Society, a major mass student organizations of the 1960s which would act as the seed bed for the future New Communist Movement, broke from its parent organization the League for Industrial Democracy in an analogous way. (Ironically, DSA founder Michael Harrington was an LID officer and clashed with the radicalizing SDS.) Additionally, those interested can read [Lenin’s advice](#) to the nascent Communist Party of Great Britain on the topic of affiliation to the Labour Party, which he argues for on the basis of the autonomy possible at that time within the very loose Labour Party. For a thoughtful critique of the limitations of revolutionary organization in the DSA, see [this article](#) by a comrade from the Austin Socialist Collective.

Base building, as it matures, will also come with developing new theory. We believe that rather than simply “applying” an ideology codified nearly a century ago, we will need to create new Marxist theory based on a “concrete analysis of our concrete situation” in the United States in 2018. While we do not know what this new theory will look like, it will have to account for the peculiar contours of the United States, in particular its legacy of slavery and genocide as well as its continued national oppression internally and imperialism externally. Socialist revolution has never been made in a settler-colonial, imperialist bourgeois democracy like the United States. It would do us well to take seriously the lack of knowledge and experience we have to draw from, while not forgetting the lessons of history. We believe that in order to do this we must break from ML orthodoxy and not be afraid to be “heretical” in our approach. Dogmatism and hero worship can only impede this necessary process:

[F]or all its calls to study, the [NCM]'s worshipful attitude toward the Marxist-Leninist classics distorted the intellectual development of its adherents. Virtually all the movement's pioneer organizations stressed the "universal truth" of Marxism-Leninism and argued that, theoretically, the challenge before US communists was solely to "apply" this truth to concrete conditions in the US. This outlook suggested that all truly important theoretical questions had already been resolved; and it betrayed a certain fear that too much exploration of new theoretical terrain would lead inexorably toward a revisionist betrayal of revolutionary principle.<sup>39</sup>

We believe that, in the U.S. in 2018, the truly important theoretical tasks have *not* been solved. We are in a period of a nascent socialist movement since the 2008 financial crisis. We should not be afraid of new ideas, and should look forward instead of harping on the 20th century. Without bending to reformism or adventurism, we must feel free to put everything back on the table and come to build strategy and theory through struggle.

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## Further Reading

### ***On the Party***

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<sup>39</sup> Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, pg. 130

**Hal Draper, ["The Myth of Lenin's 'Concept of The Party'"](#) (1990)**

Hal Draper argues that Lenin's *What is to Be Done?* is commonly misread as a manifesto for a new type of party, when in fact it was part of Lenin's attempt to adapt the German SPD model to the conditions of Tsarist Russia. He argues against common readings of the text, including Lenin's supposed disdain for spontaneity.

**Salar Mohandesi, ["All Tomorrow's Parties: A Reply to Critics"](#), *Viewpoint Magazine* (2012)**

Mohandesi argues for a conception of the party-form as a "binding element" of the disparate layers of the working class through what he calls "articulation". Articulation is the idea that the party (1) expresses the "content" of revolutionary proletarian politics and (2) forges the proletariat into a political bloc with a common goal. This conception of the party allows for more flexible organizational forms to fit a given conjuncture than the cookie-cutter approach of miniaturized Leninism.

**Adriano Sofri, ["Organizing for workers' power"](#) (1968)**

In this article written for the local Potere Operaio group in Pisa, Adriano Sofri criticizes the Leninist conception of a "cadre party", arguing instead for a mass party. Sofri argues that we must build "an organized political leadership" *within* the mass struggle rather than "to 'win' the masses to a pre-existing revolutionary leadership." This conception of party-building can help us critique sectarianism and miniaturized Leninism by looking to build organic working-class leadership rather than imposing it through an external, self-described "vanguard".

***On Democratic Centralism***

**Étienne Balibar, ["\(The Right to\) Tendencies, or the Right to Set Up Organized Groups Within the Party"](#), *Viewpoint Magazine* (1982)**

Balibar traces the history and debates around the right to form tendencies, or "factions" within party organizations. He argues that a "right to tendencies" historically was not a distinguishing factor between communists and social-democrats.

**Scott Nappalos, ["Democratic centralism in practice and idea: A critical evaluation"](#)**

Nappalos presents a historical critique of the Leninist conception of "democratic centralism". While his anarchist perspective offers little by way of solutions, we believe this pamphlet presents criticisms of democratic centralism that are worth considering.

***On Base-Building***

## **Communist Labor Party, ["Dual Power FAQ"](#)**

In this document, the CLP outlines their “dual power” strategy, which is closely related to the base-building trend. They detail the basic ideas behind building “dual power institutions,” which they position as an alternative to endless protesting.

## **DSA Refoundation Caucus, ["Base Building and Refoundation" \(2018\)](#)**

As the base-building trend is quite new, very little literature on its politics exist. In this document, DSA Refoundation outlines some key points around the base-building strategy. They position themselves in opposition to both miniaturized Leninism (which they call “vanguardism”) and “unity at all costs” socialism.

## **Tim Horras, ["Base-Building: Activist Networking or Organizing the Unorganized?"](#), *The Philadelphia Partisan* (2017)**

Tim Horras of Philly Socialists juxtaposes the base-building strategy with the common practice of “activist networking”.

## ***On the Micro-Sect***

### **Hal Draper, ["Anatomy of the Micro-Sect" \(1973\)](#)**

Draper provides a theoretical conception of the “micro-sect”, a political organization which “presents itself as the embodiment of the socialist movement, though it is a membership organization whose boundary is set more or less rigidly by the points in its political program rather than by its relation to the social struggle.” Instead, Draper argues that we should seek to build a political center within the mass movement itself.

### **Hal Draper, ["Toward a New Beginning – On Another Road: The Alternative to the Micro-Sect" \(1971\)](#)**

This article pairs well with “Anatomy of a Micro-Sect”, as it makes similar arguments while expanding on certain points.

### **Matthijs Krul, ["Some Critical Notes on the Fetishism of the Party, or: Why I am Not a Trotskyist" \(2012\)](#)**

Krul criticizes the micro-sect behavior common within the Trotskyist tendency, arguing that most Trotskyist groups have a dogmatic reading of the Russian Revolution and misguidedly seek to recreate the Bolshevik party.

## ***On the New Communist Movement***

**Max Elbaum, [Revolution in the Air](#) (2002)**

Elbaum documents the history of the New Communist Movement in the United States. It is considered the authoritative text on the NCM and provides not just history but also critical analysis. In particular, Elbaum's concept of "miniaturized Leninism" and his critique of dogmatism and sectarianism is pertinent to our project of developing a critique of the present-day Marxist-Leninist trend.

**Paul Saba, ["Theoretical Practice in the New Communist Movement"](#), *Viewpoint Magazine* (2015)**

Asad Haider of *Viewpoint* interviews Paul Saba of the NCM *Theoretical Review* and currently the archivist behind *The Encyclopedia of anti-Revisionism Online*. Saba discusses the weaknesses of the NCM, particularly his view that it was theoretically underdeveloped, with an overemphasis on practical work and obligatory readings of a few ML classics. Saba also argues that a key opportunity was missed to move Marxism forward, and that the choice to frame Maoism in that period as a defense of "correct" Marxism-Leninism against "revisionism" had deep repercussions for decades to come.

**Albert Szymanski, ["The New Communist Movement: An Obituary"](#) (1981)**

Sociologist and longtime Marxist activist Albert Szymanski documents the collapse of the New Communist Movement, in particular the "anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist trend" which includes the Organizing Committee for an Ideological Center (OCIC). Szymanski argues that NCM militants held a dogmatic conception of party-building based on mythology around the October Revolution. Szymanski argues that the way forward in 1981 is to build autonomous local groups with loose association with other groups instead of building micro-parties and rushing to found a national party by decree.