FROM TIDE TO WAVE:

Base Building and Communist Politics

Edited by Jean RD Allen & Teresa Kalisz

VOLUME 1

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"Individuals make history, but it's also a collective thing, a wave that people ride in their time, a wave made of individual actions."

-*Kim Stanley Robinson*

Introduction

Jean RD Allen & Teresa Kalisz

To Begin,

Since the first convention of the Marxist Center and the publication of All About That Base[1] and The US Left Has Only Four Tendencies[2], the base builder tendency has become a respected grouping within the left. Most leftists see the need for base building as an essential part of its activity, and the socialist left is now a much more serious force in the political landscape of almost every city. We won, in our own limited way.

In the last five years, the Marxist Center has gone from an idea into a formation in and of itself. Tenant unionism, a practice that anchored the idea of base building, is now at the center of a crisis which will propel the development of socialist practice just as much as the crises of 2020 propelled a growth in mutual aid organizations, protests, and campaigns for social reforms and socialist politicians. More broadly, the socialist left *is* a part of the left in every US city, and

socialists have an agency in US politics we have not had in our whole lifetimes.

But this ideological victory is not an end in and of itself. The Trump era has seen a growth of socialist organizing, and the birth of our milieu, but the demands that base building puts on communists have yet to be met. Rather than being a clarification and spreading of a communist strategy for revolution, tactics connected with base building or base building itself have been integrated into machine politics.

We have created a new era of socialist politics defined by its own faults and contradictions which must themselves be surpassed. The instincts which led us here, which have allowed us to foster in a limited way, are now leading us back into the swamp, and a new understanding needs to be achieved if we are to move from this limited ideological victory to greater ones. In order to develop past the contradictions of this period of socialist politics towards a communist horizon, we must understand the context in which it formed and how it responded to that context.

The Base Builder tendency

In early 2018, *It's All About That Base* (AATB) was published in the Left Wind blog. Arguing that the Left should adopt the tactic of base building rather than tailing social movements or electoral candidates, it became the heart of a new tendency. Two months later, Sophia Burns published *The US Left Has Only Four Tendencies*. In it, Burns comes out swinging: "Objectively, most inherited tendency divisions are obsolete", and argues that the left can be summed up to four tendencies based on practices. There were the government socialists, who essentially existed as an extension of the Democratic party's machine, the Protest Militants, who had long trapped themselves in the idea that any and all problems can be resolved through some permutation of a rally, the Expressive Hobbyists,

who seek to raise consciousness through increasingly ridiculous means, and the Base Builders, who think that we should establish a working class base for socialism.

But Burns & co. were vague, maybe intentionally so, about what base building exactly was and what the politics were beyond hostility to the Democrats[3]. This vagueness combined with its near rejection of political lines, meant that this new set of socialist organizers became convinced that practices inherently possessed their politics and could stand in for larger questions of revolutionary strategy. This left base building open for cooptation and integration into the very NGO and electoral politics which the "base builder tendency" opposed. This vagueness was made worse by the voluntarism encouraged by AATB which pushed a view of the left where its problems were its lack of commitment to base building, as well AATB's lack of an analysis of broader political and economic context in which we organize.

AATB's voluntarism and rejection of political line further manifested into an apolitical approach to class struggle. In fact it is almost explicitly opposed to political struggle. The lessons from the Greater Seattle Neighborhood Action Coalition[4], Burns, Sophia. drawn by Burns displays this approach. This was presented as necessary to avoid the protest hopping behaviors of the old left, but the problems with this become apparent fast. What does the base building of AATB provide us when thinking how to engage in mass social eruptions like the George Floyd protests this summer? Not much. In fact if one were to follow the guidance provided by AATB, one would have to ignore such movements. Such abstentionism is a mistake that not only breeds insularity and the sectarian behavior AATB supposedly opposes but also cedes significant moments of class struggle to liberals.

This reborn sectarianism, based not on historical tradition but on specific practices, has bred

another interconnected problem: a crude essentialism where practices were imbued with almost ethical qualities separate from the way these practices were carried out or the goal they worked towards. Base building was seen as an inherently revolutionary activity which eroded the structure of the Democratic party. That many direct aid organizations, tenants associations, and community organizations already exist with nominal independence from the Democratic party while they still serve as pressure valves of class militancy or de facto appendages of local Democratic party machines was not considered. This essentialism emerged from the lack of a sociopolitical critique from the base builder trend, which led to a call to build the base without giving any tools which would allow a would-be base builder to do this work or improve on their work.

This has come to a head in 2020. The failure of the Sanders campaign to take political power, alongside the massive growth in mutual aid and tenants organizing, means that it is now base building's time to shine. But without a political or social analysis, without a developed strategy or indeed a way to develop a politics outside of base building, we are still fighting the same fights as before, more embittered but not more effective. A certain apoliticism was always inherent in base building, coming from Burns' disdain for political lines and the need to transcend the old sect system. But that apoliticism gives us no tools to combat bureaucratic trends in the tenant unions we organize in, or in the mutual aid networks we have built. Beyond that the base building canon had little to tell us about how to engage with social movements, thus leading to a position of de-facto abstention from, for instance, the George Floyd protests. Base building's abstention from ideological struggle allowed it to rapidly grow in influence, but the apolitical trend in base building now threatens to make what socialists and communists are building a base for left progressives rather than a revolutionary working class movement.

Synopsis

Our intent is to provide a more substantive program that will help our comrades in the months and years ahead. Rather than insisting on a tactic and leaving the content of that tactic blank, we have arranged a series of articles which seek to give a discerning socialist a series of conclusions that will allow for greater strategic thinking.

It Takes Organizers To Make A Revolution by Rodrigo Nunes is the first article in the dossier, having been published in November of 2017. It sets up an important theme that is elaborated throughout the dossier: that 'spontaneous' movements are actually organized at layers we cannot perceive, and as such the opposition between 'organization' and 'spontaneity' is far more complex and less opposed than we are led to believe.

Everyday Ruptures, by Teresa Kalisz, is the centerpiece of this dossier. Through an analysis of the state and an understanding that meaningful social ruptures occur outside of systemic crises , it allows us to develop a strategy of building broad organizations oriented towards the ebbs and flows of periods ruptures and calm, each cycle propelling us closer to revolution.

After this, we then have two sections of two articles each. The section on practices speaks not just to specifically reform and labor work (through Teresa Kalisz' *Rethinking Reforms* and Kate Griffith's *The Rank and File Strategy on New Grounds*), but how to think through any of the campaigns we start. *Rethinking Reforms* gives us an understanding that it is not just *what* work we do but the way in which we do it that gives it a revolutionary content. It is easy to win a reform in such a way that the movement does not develop, or worse, to lose in a way that builds nothing. *The Rank And File Strategy on New Grounds* points to the role that reproductive labor has served in the latest wave of labor militancy, and the ways that an analysis of social reproduction can bolster our labor work. It

also provides a critical reassessment of one of the more influential approaches to labor organizing within the revived left, the Rank and File strategy.

The section on organization speaks, again, to the importance of the *way* we do things. Counterpower's *One, Two, Three Many Parties Of Autonomy* argues that the current fractured state of the left *can* be a boon if we let it, that a coordinated body of radical organizations allows for the development of cadre without unnecessary sectarianism. Jean Allen's *The Collective Mind* argues that we should build our organizations in a deliberately democratic manner, because robust internal democracy allows us to develop both our strategic thinking and our capacity to treat each other as comrades, a skill so important for the socialist movement and so difficult to learn outside of it.

In the conclusion we take this together to form both an analysis of the immediate future and the place of the socialist and communist left within it, and create a program based off of the previous articles. That we should root our work in the class while doing so in a deliberately political way, which develops the organizations we build and the comrades who help build it. It is through the full implementation of this program--to root oneself in the class while you point towards a political goal, to be present in the crisis and build up our comrades and organizations within that crisis, to engage in our work in a deliberative way-- that will bring us to the final struggle. There are a dozen proposals of deference which tell us to avoid some sphere of struggle, a dozen neat tricks which promise to get us to socialism easily. Cast them aside.

—Jean RD Allen & Teresa Kalisz

Notes

1   DB Cooper, "Its All About that Base: A dossier on the basebuilding trend", Left Wind, (March 18 2018), https://theleftwind.wordpress.com/2018/03/16/its-all-about-that-base-a-dossier-on-the-base-building-trend/

2   Sophia Burns, "The US Left Has Only 4 Tendencies", Medium (May 12 2018), https://sophia-burns.medium.com/the-us-left-has-only-four-tendencies-816746c27b51

3   Basebuilding was often defined as involving rank and file unionism, tenant unionism, mutual aid work and community organizing, with the question 'for what' left intentionally blank.

4   Burns, Sophia. "Summation of the Experience of the Greater Seattle Neighborhood Action Coalition." Left Wind, 2018, drive.google.com/file/d/1-BXw-38Bvi1IAJXWg5cilp5F9A-ncYFG/view?fbclid=IwAR3x03b1vjLVsSf-TH7ZxFx7Yw_RL8A5Php3mWJSoCeAcMaYGDd3vkEUkNI.

Acknowledgements

I. Preliminaries

Introduction to *It Takes Organizers to Make A Revolution*

Jean RD Allen

Every generation reinterprets its received canon. Looking to its own conditions, its own struggles, a generation will read the classics in their own way, and pick which parts of the canon most apply to it. This process is a large part of how theoretical advances occur. And so, at the beginning of this new period of growth in socialist organization, came It Takes Organizers To Make A Revolution. Comrade Nunes is among many others in the past few years who have reappraised our socialist heroes, not as hallowed saints or unchallengeable geniuses, but as fellow travelers, organizers who have something to say to us about what we are doing from their own long experience.

Aside from its importance in a recontextualization of the Bolshevik experience, It Takes Organizers To Make A Revolution brings up a key thread we see through all of these works: the re-understanding of 'spontaneous' movements. Spontaneity is often brought up as the counterpoint of an organized movement, as the expression of pure will of the working class before it is altered and demeaned by 'organizers'. Others see spontaneous social movements as always-already captured by liberal activist groups. This is the attitude that many of the early base building documents took

at the end of a long period of decline in protest militancy. These two positions have a variety of shades between them, but both of them cast spontaneity as something to be embraced *or* opposed, as a position to have an opinion on alongside one's pre-existing sectarian identity.

What Comrade Nunes notes is that spontaneous movements are, themselves, organized movements:

> *"Think of how a "spontaneous" action comes to pass. A person talks to another, who talks to another, who talks to another; suddenly, an idea occurs, which will probably be in circulation even before any individual voices it. A meeting is called, the original idea is presented, some people walk out, others point out its flaws, eventually someone proposes a new idea; a short text is prepared, a new meeting is called, and so on. Spontaneity, the example shows, does not mean the same behavior actualizing itself at once across a large number of people: it always starts somewhere; there are always some people who organize it. That does not mean they have to (or should be) always the same people,*

nor does it make it dependent on the genius of superior individuals. The best way to think it probably still is Gabriel Tarde's microsociology: it takes "inventions" brought forward by particular individuals for something new to happen, but these inventions are nothing more than the recombination of trends already present around them."

What this presages, what the rest of this dossier argues, is that if there is a relationship between organization and spontaneity, if spontaneity is organization by other means, then it is possible for us to *organize* in the midst of spontaneous moments, and moreover, that if we do not, others will. ■

It Takes Organizers to Make a Revolution

Rodrigo Nunes

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I think one should still be a Leninist, at least in the very precise sense that we cannot really look to the spontaneity and creativity of the masses to establish analytical groups in a lasting way—if it still makes sense to speak of Leninism when the objective of the hour is no longer the promotion of a highly centralized party, but a means for the masses to take control of their fate.

> *– Félix Guattari, "La causalité, la subjectivité, l'histoire" (1966/1967)*

This article was at one point called "What We Might (Still) Learn from Lenin," and it opened with a disclaimer: "You will be excused for thinking that you have read this text before, but please bear with me." In the end, I decided that even that was not enough; merely having "Lenin" in the title risked turning some readers off. This little story illustrates how much Lenin's name can function

as a territorial marker signalling belonging and exclusion; but also, given my belief that much of what is said here would be perfectly acceptable to people who identify as "anti-Leninists," it says something about what that territoriality might be making us miss.

Rather than construct another hagiography about how Lenin was always right, or another plea reducing his thought to a single take-home message ("build the party"), this text will propose that we approach him not as a titan, but as an equal. Not the all-conquering revolutionary, the master tactician who always made the right decision, let alone the mighty party- or state-builder, but something more prosaic and relatable, though no less important: an organizer. That is, someone who, in all those different areas, could draw on his experience as an activist in clandestine student and

worker circles in the late 19th century and during the years of turmoil that followed the Russian Revolution of 1905, as well as on his work producing and distributing Iskra from 1900 to 1903; who fought tooth and nail from 1908 to 1912 against those in Russian Social Democracy who wished to abandon organizing and concentrate exclusively on interventions in parliament and in the legal press; and who established himself as the "idol of the praktiki [organizers]" in the party, not only for an interest in the "nuts-and-bolts" of underground activity that "showed an appreciation (...) rare among the intellectual leaders," but also for providing organizers with a "romantic self-image of leaders that were capable of inspiring boundless confidence."[1]

An organizer, then, like many today—albeit a more experienced one, or at least one with a very unique experience. At any rate, someone with a lot of respect for the political work of talking to people, sharing skills and infrastructure, translating abstract ideas into clear messages and action, agitation, education, campaigning and so on; and with a clear understanding that big results are unlikely to come by without a lot of effort and a disposition for what is often unglamorous drudge.[2]

Yet maybe this does not take us very far from a standard picture of Lenin. The focus on political work is perfectly compatible with the idea of him as someone whose vision of politics consisted essentially in organizing *others*—of building a party of committed activists who would bring consciousness to workers "from the outside," eventually substituting themselves for those who should be the true protagonists of the revolution; a vision that could lead nowhere else but a dictatorship of the party, and of the party leader, over the people. In that context, "it takes organizers to make a revolution" would appear as shorthand for "it takes organizers to make *from above* the revolution *we want*," as opposed to the one people would make left to their own devices. "Organizing," in turn, would

figure as the exact opposite of the word that seems to be the bane of *What Is to Be Done?*: "spontaneity".

But are "organizing" and "spontaneity" really opposites? Think of how a "spontaneous" action comes to pass. A person talks to another, who talks to another, who talks to another; suddenly, an idea occurs, which will probably be in circulation even before any individual voices it. A meeting is called, the original idea is presented, some people walk out, others point out its flaws, eventually someone proposes a new idea; a short text is prepared, a new meeting is called, and so on. Spontaneity, the example shows, does not mean the same behavior actualizing itself at once across a large number of people: it always *starts somewhere*; there are always *some people* who *organize it*. That does not mean they have to (or should be) always the same people, nor does it make it dependent on the genius of superior individuals. The best way to think it probably still is Gabriel Tarde's microsociology: it takes "inventions" brought forward by particular individuals for something new to happen, but these inventions are nothing more than the recombination of trends already present around them.

So how do we come to oppose spontaneity to organization? By presupposing an inside/outside distinction—one usually represented, precisely, by the figure of the party. What workers do on their own is "spontaneous," however organized it may be; but if an initiative comes from the party, it cannot be spontaneous, as it comes from "outside." Ironically, it may well have been the Bolsheviks and their epigones who, in ultimately associating it with excessive party interference and control, gave "organizing" a bad name. Following this association, what is "spontaneous" develops organically, from itself, horizontally, without hierarchy or manipulation, and truly expresses people's interests and desires; but "to organize" is to come from outside, and thus also to place oneself above, as an expert, a leader, an enlightened

vanguard, someone immune to the "indignity of speaking for others."[3] The wish to "organize" is therefore "Leninist," something to be shunned and reproached. In the same way that each individual should only represent herself, one can only legitimately organize one's own immediate social group; but at the limit—seeing as organizing members of one's own group is still organizing *others*—one should really only organize oneself.[4]

Yet, as is well known, "organizers" are also to be found in what develops organically and horizontally. True, quite often organizers will come from outside a social group, striking up relationships and making proposals as to what could be done. But if their ideas do not chime with those of most members of the group, or if they come across as untrustworthy (too rash, too cautious, manipulative), these ideas will fall flat, and they have no means to enforce them. On the other hand, if someone does not "belong" to a group in the sociological sense, but their proposals are voluntarily taken up by members of that group and become a part of their activity, does that make that activity non-spontaneous? Apart from the fact of that difference in social background, which otherwise does not affect the outcome, how would this be different from a "spontaneous" process as described above?

Admitting then that "spontaneity" and "leadership" may appear intermingled to different degrees, the only place where to safely draw a sharp distinction would be in those cases where the outside organizer, by treachery or force, makes people do something against their will or (what we judge to be) their interest. But that distinction, by contrast, allows us to identify those cases in which the actions of an outside organizer would not be reproachable, and could in fact be taken as part of a "spontaneous" process: when they motivate people to do something they might not have otherwise done, but which they informedly choose to do, and take on as their own action. And once these people communicate that idea to other members of their

social group, are they not also being organizers? Understood in this sense, "it takes organizers to make a revolution" would mean little more than "it takes some people to take the initiative."

The key difference here is obviously between using or not using, having or not having the means to coerce people; in Clastrean terms, it is the difference between strong and weak leadership.[5] Rejection of organizing would thus only seem justified as a rejection of *strong* leadership, not weak—for who can fault someone for advancing a course of action that others embrace as theirs?[6] And if what moves that rejection is a fear of becoming "like a party," it follows that actually it is of becoming like a *powerful* party that people are afraid. What is ironic here is that this fear usually crops up not in situations of fair-to-middling power, but of powerlessness—which is a little like refusing to do something at all because you are afraid you would be too good at it. There is, of course, something salutary in worrying about the risks of concentrating too much power, but it should certainly not be a reason not to take an initiative. The thing about starting something is that leadership always starts out weak—so if you turn out to be a bad leader, your (non-)followers will no doubt let you know.

A lot of the dogged confusion surrounding the idea of spontaneity is down to the fact that we use the word in two different meanings that are almost exactly opposed—the Kantian, which refers to freedom from external determination, and the Marxist. For a belligerently orthodox Marxist like Lenin, the word had one important negative association that is lost on our spontaneity-friendly ears. It suggested *mechanicism*, that is, a non-dialectical understanding of the development of historical forces as described by Marx, and thus a tendency to treat the German philosopher's words as an objective prophecy that would eventually materialize by itself: come the time, the proletariat will just know what to

do and be ready to do it. Not that Lenin did not have an enthusiastic belief in the "spontaneous" [*stikhiinyi*][7] awakening of the proletarian masses in Russia and the world. In fact, his emphasis on organization is explicitly stated in terms of being prepared for that upsurge: "the *stikhiinost* of the mass demands from us ... a mass of purposiveness."[8]) Lenin's polemic was not against "spontaneity" as such, but against those Russian Social-Democracts who used it, as he saw it, as an excuse. He suspected that, by arguing that political work should be restricted to supporting workers' demands for economic reforms, and dismissing any talk of the workers taking political power as a preoccupation imported into it "from outside," they were setting the scene for a situation in which the proletariat would confine itself to economic issues while they became permanently entrenched as its political representatives. (As it turns out, he was right; the terrible irony, of course, is that this is what ended up happening anyway.)

Lenin was convinced that a definitive proletarian upsurge was on its way. Yet he did not understand it mechanically, as a process at once independent from the actions of individual and collective agents and driving them from above, but dialectically. It would happen and it would lead to the expected outcome *because* agents would *deliberately* take the necessary steps for that. There was no contradiction between the immanent unfolding of the process and agents deciding to act: the immanent unfolding was *nothing more* than the actions of those agents, rather than a transcendent fate governing them as automata. There was no "natural" development of history that would somehow be spoiled by people acting according to what they desired or believed had to be done. The development of history both produced those desires and beliefs and was the outcome of the actions that followed from them, and so it was necessary not only to act upon those desires and beliefs, but to do it in the most effective, consequential way.

This might well be the sense in which Lenin would understand the phrase "it takes revolutionaries to make a revolution." It is also why "organization" and "spontaneity" can ultimately not be easily opposed, as one is merely a moment or aspect of the other: it is only by organizing itself that any kind of spontaneous initiative can take place and produce effects; but it is only because there is the spontaneous inclination to do something that there is something to organize. Everyone is organizing others and being organized by them all the time.

It is this philosophical kernel of Leninism, taken in abstraction from whatever else we might think constitutes it (the party, voluntarism, centralism, etc.), that Félix Guattari alluded to in the passage used as an epigraph to this text. "Leninism," in that context, stands for a *politics with the subject in*.[9] Not "the Subject," as some abstract, metaphysical entity, but *oneself, us, you*. This is politics from the point of view of subjective implication; it asks "what do *we need to do* so that we can get what we want?" rather than a non-committal "what should happen?" Its grammatical case is the vocative; it *interpellates*. Think that something should exist—an all-Russian party (as for Lenin), lasting "analytical groups"[10] (for Guattari)? *You* cannot trust it to "naturally" happen; *you* must go out and do it. Cannot do it on your own? Then you must find the people with whom. Those you found do not agree with your original plan? Work with them to elaborate one with which everyone is satisfied. What you have created is good, but cannot last without support from elsewhere? Find the allies who can support you. They are sympathetic, but not organized? Then you must help them organize. In short, politics with the subject in is a machine for turning "there should be" statements into "we must." Do not sit around talking about what ideally would happen, as if that had nothing to do with you; implicate yourself, your own subjective position and activity, into every "objective" analysis of things.

Obviously, the reason why we often restrict ourselves to talking abstractly about how things should be is that it we lack the means to do what we believe should be done; but this is exactly why the question of *organizing the collective capacity to act* is the crucial one for Lenin. Apart from exceptional, revolutionary situations, the powerful always have the *potestas*[11] to ensure that people will, when push comes to shove, do their bidding: the police, the army, the press, the wage relation, the accumulated fear and passive consent of the majority. The weak, on the other hand, have nothing but their *potentia*, yet each individual's *potentia* on its own is not much, and certainly not enough to face *potestas* down. So it is imperative that they come together, the capacity to act of each multiplying the capacity of all others. Here again, "there should be" becomes "we must": that we are incapable of doing something now is not an alibi, but a fault; we must find out what to do in order to acquire that capacity, and do it. On this point, Lenin is as tyrannically superegoic as a neoliberal self-help guru: do not accept your present limits; change approach, try harder, expand the capacity to act. "[I]t is our direct *guilt* that we 'push' workers too little onto the road (...) of an apprenticeship in the trade of revolutionary activity."[12]) Much of the polemical vim in *What Is to Be Done?* is directed at what he calls "infatuation with [one's] artisanal limitations": a self-complacent resignation which, rather than striving to enhance *potentia*, ends up presenting powerlessness as a virtue. Against this, Lenin's imperative is: do not give up on your ambition; if you truly believe in your idea of social transformation, go out there and make it happen.

"The question of organization" is essentially the problem of how to coordinate the collective capacity to act. Lenin's answer was, of course, the party—but it would be a big mistake to confuse the answer and the question, and to think that rejecting the former invalidates the latter.

When he wrote *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin had big ambitions, but no means of realizing them. He envisioned the party yet to be built as a "scaffolding"[13] for popular *potentia*, a sort of deep, underlying structure at the heart of the growing movement against the Tsarist regime: connecting its different parts, injecting it with a cohesive narrative, inoculating it against "opportunists," providing it with the "correct" analysis of the situation and training newcomers into revolutionary practice. It arguably did function in that way in the course of the 1917 Revolution, placing itself at the forefront of a much vaster uprising when the time came to bring down the Provisional Government. Yet it undeniably went on to become a straightjacket of *potestas*; and while we cannot abstract from this fate all the extreme circumstances that the Bolsheviks faced after taking power, we should not let that preclude us from asking whether a different organization, with a different organizational culture, might not have dealt with those circumstances differently.

Luckily, Lenin helped us in the job of parsing his reasoning by summarizing it in five statements: (1) in order to retain consistency and continuity, a revolutionary movement requires a solid organization of leaders or guides; (2) the more people "spontaneously" join the movement, the more that organization is necessary, and the more solid it must be; (3) that organization "must consist for the most part of people who treat revolutionary activity as a full-time trade," rather than "artisans" or dilettantes who drop in and out; (4) for safety reasons, especially in a police state such as Tsarist Russia, membership of the organization must be as narrow as possible, restricted to experienced and trustworthy activists; (5) but it must work as broadly as possible, connecting with people across the country and the class spectrum in order to bring them into the struggle.[14] The irony that strikes us at once is that (4) and (5) are not too different from the organizational logic behind the uprisings that have taken place around the

world since 2011: from the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter and beyond, we tend to find a combination of small organizing cores advancing messages, tactics and action proposals, and large-scale mobilizations, assemblies and encampments were more people were drawn into the struggle.[15] The main differences seem to be that these organizing cores did not see themselves as mutually exclusive (they did not think there had to be *one* organization); they did not necessarily see themselves as organizations as such (often preferring to remain informal and having no strategy for recruitment and growth); and, although each of them no doubt believed their analysis to be correct (otherwise, why act on it?), they did not claim for it the status of scientific knowledge. These characteristics helped prevent any of them from taking over the movement; yet the uncertain outcome of those upheavals raises the question of what it was, if anything, that could have made the coordination of collective capacity more effective. What we know for sure is that history has failed to present us with a perfect, failsafe solution. What the comparison between the two moments suggests is that it is possible to accept some of the premises of a position without accepting all of them, and we would therefore do better not to treat labels like "Leninist," "anarchist" and "autonomist" as pre-packaged identities to adopt or reject, but engage with the particulars of their respective arguments on their own merit.

As a matter of fact, Lenin himself was a staunch advocate of tactical flexibility. *"Left Wing" Communism*, written two decades and two revolutions after *What Is To Be Done?*, insists on it to the point of repetition. As in politics it is impossible to "know in advance which methods of struggle will be applicable and to our advantage," it is necessary to master all of them; no method, legal or illegal, can be discarded a priori.[16] This older, pragmatic Lenin is not merely attempting to rationalize the retreats that followed the revolution; we will find the same ideas in the younger, ambitious Lenin.

Instead, one could read *"Left Wing" Communism* as making a rather activist-minded point: the targets of his criticism wish to reap the results of revolution before they have sown its seeds; they want to be radical without putting in the slog.[17] Except, Lenin seems to be saying, "radicality" is a relative property: nobody is radical intransitively, in abstract. To be radical is to be radical *in relation to* a concrete situation, by finding in it the most advanced position that can win over the greatest support. Outside of that, "radicality" is a folly, or a purely aesthetic gesture.

To be sure, there will be many occasions in which nothing stands to be gained from engaging with parliamentary activity, state power, even trade unions and left-of-center parties. But in politics there is no "always," no "never." Anyone who holds on to a "correct" position in abstract, regardless of circumstances, is likely to be right only about as often as a stopped clock; anyone who wishes "to think up for the workers some kind of recipe that will provide them with cut-and-dried solutions for all contingencies (...) is simply a charlatan."[18] One cannot choose to disregard institutions completely and in all situations, as if by virtue of that they would simply cease to exist. For as long as they do exist, they continue to have effects over our lives, threatening with their *potestas* and limiting our *potentia*, and so it would be an elementary blunder if we mistook our "subjective 'rejection' of a certain reactionary institution for its actual destruction by the combined operation of a number of objective factors."[19] If one does not want to, or cannot, be involved in parliamentary politics or the state directly, one must still find ways to interfere indirectly in them for as long as they exist—either by cultivating interlocutors, or by building enough collective capacity to act so as to limit their power and impose decisions on them.

The same goes for alliances. "The only ones who fear temporary alliances even with unreliable people are those with no confidence in

themselves"[20]—that is, who are unsure of having the strength to hold their allies to account and to determine how things might go. This does not mean that any alliance or compromise is good or even acceptable. The point is rather that this is not a question of abstract "right" or "wrong," "always" or "never," but of gauging the concrete situation and, above all, of having the necessary *potentia* to influence the course of events. In any case, if one is operating in a situation of social heterogeneity, where there is an ecology of different actors, and striving to go from less *potentia* to more, alliances are inevitable. It is "[o]ne of the biggest mistakes" to think "that a revolution can be made by revolutionaries alone"; without alliances "in the most diverse spheres of activity there can be no question of any successful communist construction."[21] A common future is built "not with abstract human material, nor with human material specially prepared by us, but with the human material bequeathed to us by capitalism," and therefore demands of those attempting to build it all the flexibility they can afford.[22]

As for reforms, it is clear that they are often equivocal and could lead in opposing directions: either paving the way for broader transformations or dulling more radical impulses. Yet again, the issue is not what they are "in themselves," but the direction in which they can be steered, and the collective capacity to do the steering. "A genuine broadening of scope for the workers—even a miniature one—can only mean a genuine step forward," provided one has the means to exploit that opening and use it as a stepping stone for something else.[23]

Ultimately, Lenin's boundless optimism and assuredness flowed from a source of self-confidence to which we no longer have access: a firm belief in the scientific correctness of the worldview on which he based his analyses and forecasts. ("The Marxist doctrine is omnipotent," he wrote, "because it is true."[24]) The failed predictions and nasty blunders of those such as him have taught us to be much more cautious with our certainties, and to see the future as essentially open, contingent, undetermined. Yet here we find one final irony: it is in times as thoroughly anti-deterministic as ours that a politics with the subject in, with its imperative to build agency and the collective capacity to act, makes the most sense. It is precisely because the outcome is uncertain either way that we should see things as being up to us, and commit to doing (whatever we believe to be) our very best. Evidently, that might not be much at any given time. Yet the point of asking "what is to be done?" for Lenin was that in any situation, however constrained, there is always *something* to be done. If political life is "an infinite chain of an infinite number of links," there will always be a link that we can find and hold on to "as tightly as possible" which affords us the possibility of changing our constraints, overcoming our present limitations and expanding our collective capacity to act.[25] It may as yet be far from being the link that "can best guarantee that he who controls the link controls the whole chain"; it is still somewhere to start and to build on.[26]

"Ambition" and "pragmatism," the two attitudes that bookend Lenin's trajectory as a thinker of organization, are possibly the two most tainted words in politics. "Ambition," "keeping one's eye on the prize." smacks of bloody-mindedness, inflexibility, lack of dialogical openness, imposing your views upon others by force or deceit. "Pragmatism," on the other hand, suggests spinelessness, opportunism, lack of commitment, an excessive readiness for compromise. The problem might be that we have seen the two deployed separately so often that we have come to think them in isolation, instead of both together at once. Ambition without pragmatism is empty; pragmatism without ambition is blind. The point is rather to face every situation with the maximum of ambition that is compatible with a maximum of pragmatism. You may have an entirely different idea from

Lenin's of what "winning" might be; but whatever your idea is, and whatever cards you happen to be holding at any given time, if you really believe your own ideas, you must play to win. That does not mean doing *what you want*, nor does it mean settling for a poor version of *whatever works*; it means *thinking strategically*. That is, taking into account the broader context of a complex ecology of struggles and agents in order to find *the most transformative thing possible in that concrete situation*: what can best exploit the political potentials opened up by the conjuncture so as to transform its present constraints the most, what will take it the farthest from what it is and the closest to where you want it to be. Sometimes a little targeted effort might produce large-scale effects; sometimes it will just seem like slog. Either way, as we have seen, acting in this way may be the only exact meaning we can give to the idea of "being radical." ■

Notes

1 Lars Lih, Lenin (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 71. The quip about Lenin as an idol is from Menshevik leader Pavel Axelrod.

2 Celebrating the out-of-the-blue success of 1905, Lenin wrote: "In the spring of 1905 our Party was a league of underground circles; in the autumn it became the party of the millions of the proletariat. Did this happen 'all at once', gentlemen, or did it take ten years of slow, steady, unobtrusive and quiet work to prepare and ensure such a result?." V.I. Lenin, "Some Features of the Present Collapse," Collected Works, vol. 15 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 154. (Italics in the original.) All Lenin texts are taken from this edition, unless otherwise noted.

3 Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power," in Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Smith (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 209.

4 The corollary of that reasoning would be: we believe that everyone should get organized but, apart from organizing ourselves, there is nothing we can do about that.

5 See Pierre Clastres, Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology, trans. Robert Hurley and Abe Stein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987); Rodrigo Nunes, "The Network Prince: Leadership between Clastres and Machiavelli," International Journal of Communication, 9 (2015): 3662-79.

6 Curiously, this is a complaint that Lenin directs at those who criticized him for advancing, in 1901's "Where to Begin?," a plan for how to structure a party out of the galaxy of existing Marxist organizations in Russia: "was it really possible not to understand that if the comrades accept the plan presented to their attention, then they will carry it out not because of 'subordination' but from a conviction of its necessity to our common cause, and if they do not accept it, then the 'sketch' (...) will simply remain no more than a sketch?." V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done?, in Lars Lih, Lenin Rediscovered. What Is to Be Done? in Context (Chicago: Haymarket, 2006), 815. I am using the Lih translation throughout.

7 Lars Lih has several interesting remarks on the etymology of the noun stikhiinost and its adjective form, stikhiinyi, as well as on its uses in the historical context in which Lenin wrote, by which he argues that their translation as "spontaneity" and "spontaneous" is misleading. See Lars Lih, Lenin Rediscovered, 616-28.

8 V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done?, 721. Later in the book, an exasperated Lenin writes: "Our basic sin in organisational matters is that due to our artisanal limitations, we have injured the prestige of revolutionaries in Rus'. (...) I hope no praktiki will be angry at me for these sharp words since, insofar as we are talking about lack of preparation, I apply them first of all to myself." Ibid., 788. (Italics in the original.)

9 This is a play on Ingold's well-known quip that anthropology is "philosophy with the people in." Tim Ingold, "Editorial," Man 27(4) (1992):695-6.]

10 To understand what Guattari means by this, the best place to start might be Deleuze's preface to Psychanalyse et Transversalité, also published as Gilles Deleuze, "Three Group-Related Problems," ain Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotexte, 2004), 193-203.

11 As with "spontaneity," the problem with the English word "power" is that two meanings coexist in it; luckily, they can be differentiated in Latin and Latin languages in general. Following Spinoza, we can identify potentia (puissance, potencia) with the capacity to act that every individual has, whereas potestas (pouvoir, poder) refers to a capacity to act that is actualised in institutions (the army, the police, the judiciary etc.). Potestas is an extension and expansion of potentia, but by that very token it can be used by those who detain it in order to limit the potentia of those who do not; as John Holloway would put it, it is power over others. In this way, we could say that potestas is to potentia (and strong leadership to weak leadership) in the same way that dead labour is to living labour: the same thing in origin, but externalised, ossified, and turned against itself.

12 V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done?, 794. (Italics in the original).

13 Ibid., 828. The metaphor of the scaffolding first occurs in "Where To Begin?," where it is used in reference to the role that an all-Russian Social-Democratic newspaper (Iskra) could play in terms of structuring the party out of existing networks. See V.I. Lenin, "Where To Begin?," Collected Works, vol.5, 23-4. The newspaper, incidentally, is also described by Lenin as a "collective organiser."

14 V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done?, 786.

15 See Paolo Gerbaudo, Tweets and the Streets. Social Media and Contemporary Activism (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Anna Feigenbaum, Fabian Frenzel and Patrick McCurdy, Protest Camps (London: Zed Book, 2013); Rodrigo Nunes, Organisation of the Organisationless. Collective Action After Networks (London: Mute/Post-Media Lab, 2014); Zeynep Tufekci, Twitter and Tear Gas. The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

16 V. I. Lenin, "Left Wing" Communism, an Infantile Disorder, Collected Works, vol. 31, 96.

17 "It is not difficult to be a revolutionary when revolution has already broken out (...). It is far more difficult — and far more precious — to be a revolutionary when the conditions for direct, open, really mass and really revolutionary struggle do not yet exist, to be able to champion the interests of the revolution (by propaganda, agitation and organisation) in non-revolutionary bodies, and quite often in downright reactionary bodies, in a non-revolutionary situation, among the masses who are incapable of immediately appreciating the need for revolutionary methods of action." Ibid., 97. "[Y]ou are 'terribly revolutionary', but in reality you are frightened by the comparatively minor difficulties of the struggle against bourgeois influences within the working-class movement." Ibid., 115.

18 Ibid., 38.

19 Ibid., 62.

20 V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done?, 690.

21 V.I. Lenin, "On the Significance of Militant Materialism," Collected Works, vol. 33, 229. The point about social heterogeneity can be explicitly presented in class analysis terms: "Capitalism would not be capitalism if the proletariat pur sang were not surrounded by a large number of exceedingly motley types (...). From all this follows (..) the absolute necessity (...) to resort to changes of tack, to conciliation and compromises with the various groups of proletarians, with the various parties of the workers and small masters." V.I. Lenin, "Left Wing" Communism, 74.

22 Ibid., 50.

23 "Revolutionary Social Democracy has always included and still includes in its activity the struggle for reforms. But it uses 'economic' agitation to present to the government not only the demand for this or that measure but also (first of all) the demand to cease being an autocratic government." V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done?, 778.

24 V.I. Lenin, "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism," Collected Works, vol. 19, 21.

25 V.I. Lenin, What Is To Be Done?, 822.

26 Ibid.

II. Everyday Ruptures

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Foreword: Building the Road of Rupture

Jean R.D. Allen

Whether we liked it or not, over the past few years one of the defining elements of US socialist strategy was the Sanders campaign. The potential of a successful Sanders campaign made electoral strategies imminent in a way few other analyses could challenge. Who else could boast of a strategy which could put social democratic politicians at the center of power both within the formal state and within the Democratic party, all within the space of 4 years?

But with Bernie Sanders ending his second presidential campaign, this strategy seems to have failed. But with Bernie Sanders ending his second presidential campaign, it is time to pivot. Sanders is too old to run in a third campaign, and no socialist politician with anywhere near the name recognition or network to pull off a Sanders level effort, we are left looking at four to eight years before we can hitch ourselves to another Sanders, at least.

Any strategy will see the world in one lens, will look at every problem as a nail to be hammered. As such, the temptations of a Sanders presidency forced blinders upon us which led to many missed opportunities. From 2016 to 2020, there were

numerous opportunities to develop new layers of organization which were instead redirected towards the possibility of winning the presidency. From the Airport Protests to the 2018 hurricane season, to movements within prisons, to the relatively spontaneous if quickly disorganized climate movement, to the Red for Ed wildcat strikes, the Left failed to work within these mini-crises because they did not immediately give us a leg up in the fight for state power. In many cases these moments slipped by, either becoming less immediately cruel or slowly transforming into an accepted new normal.

Strategic choices are not made in a vacuum. Whenever we choose to undertake one set of actions that precludes another set. Any strategy also locks us into a set of practices that we increasingly see as the real tools of power. While electoral campaigns can be utilized within a variety of socialist strategies, the horizon of a Sanders presidency subordinated all other socialist projects to the contingency of Sander's victory. Our inability to meaningfully intervene in the micro-crises listed above was partially a result of the under-development of DSA chapters, but it was just as much a product of seeing these struggles as add-ons to

the real struggle: getting Sanders elected. By giving these fights nominal attention we softened the blow of participating in a defeat, but school privatizations, deportations, police brutality, have continued apace. So let us not mince words. While we focused our energies around what we all knew was a long shot, the white supremacist state, the climate crisis, and disaster capitalism have advanced themselves, and those effects are being felt, every day, by the working class. Furthermore, the 2020 Democratic Primary should make it clear that the Democratic Party will not just sit back and allow us to break them in half. Cases of what can only be called voter suppression, with dozens of polling locations closing in poor and non-white areas leading to hour long lines, are too numerous to count.[1] And even if we weren't expecting Bernie to win, and were solely working in his campaign to increase our membership or change the narrative, even so the Sanders campaign and DSA's involvement in it have generated less organization than even its biggest supporters could have hoped. Trying the same strategy *again* after it is clear that pursuing this strategy hurts us in other ways, as the clock on an unsurvivable biosphere continues to count down, after our enemies in the state have shown they will not allow us to try it the same way, is tantamount to running again and again into a concrete wall.

It would seem absolutely obvious that this is the time for a new strategy. But the need for a new strategy still requires us to develop it. We should not assume that new material conditions will give us permission to steer the socialist movement. The failure of the Sanders campaign is our failure whether we cheered for it or not. It means that for four years, we advocated, argued, and analyzed but failed to propose a strategy as compelling as that of the electoralists.

For a strategy to be accepted, it needs an analysis of the present, an end-state it aims for, and a clear narrative of how we can use the tactics available to us to get from the present to the end-state we want. The strategy of trying to win through a Sanders campaign had a clear analysis of the present, split between corporate and progressive or socialist Democrats; an end state it aimed for, a Sanders presidency which would pass our legislative agenda; and a clear role for nearly every member of the 'left' from DSA members to Twitter users to media figures. What opposition rose to meet that strategy rarely rose past the level of sentiment.

Alternatively, we have strategies which are in fact the elevation of a tactic or an organizational tool to the level of strategy. Consider knee-jerk calls to commit to street action or to engage in mutual aid work without a defined end goal. I cannot think of a better example of this than an action which occurred in my school shortly before Occupy Wall Street. We decided first to occupy our administrative building, and then figure out a demand based on that tactic. But we were a state college, so our administrative building could not actually fulfil any demands we raised. We 'won' the occupation and commenced to dancing, having gained nothing and advanced nothing. I and many others dropped out of politics for years after this failure.

After Trump's election, some socialists tried to overcome these limited tactics by focusing on "base building". These "base builders" viewed our primary goal as building a proletarian base for socialism through a combination of mutual aid and militant tenants/workers' unions. Prominent base building advocates like Tim Horras of Philly Socialists and Sophia Burns of Seattle Communists argued against involvement in elections or even in protests and traditional activism, urging socialists instead to take up the task of "organizing the unorganized."

This line of thinking was unquestionably a development over what had existed before. Base building gave us a vision of socialists as the builders of

the basis of their own politics rather than a group destined to tail the work of others. It gave us the idea of organizing autonomous tenant unions rather than exclusively showing up to protests with signs and pamphlets. And base builders' rejection of existing sectarian divisions made sense in the context of a left exclusively divided along obsolete and arcane histories.

But base building's advocates failed to link their tactics to a more developed, long term strategy. In the absence of such a strategy, base building became an end in itself for many of its proponents. Sophia Burns urged complete separation from existing socialist or working class organizations, which she said were all already compromised by the capitalist state:

"Creating [Socialism] will take a full-blown revolution, not a gradual build-up of legislative reforms, because the liberal-democratic political process will never allow socialism. It never has and it never will because it was designed from the get-go to make that impossible. It does that not by banning dissent but by giving it a venue to express itself and lobby the government (or protest it!), thereby taming it into a perpetual loyal opposition.

That's why any socialism that's bound to the political process is self-defeating in the end."[2]

To put her argument simply, what is required of socialists is to build our own base wholly disconnected from other groups and break with our enemies, from formal activist organizations, to the Democratic Party, to the capitalist state. In breaking from these groups and rejecting the "middle class" politics of the rest of the socialist movement, we are then freed to...well, she is never clear about this. It seems that simply building tenant unions and organizing the working class without a requirement to connect those immediate actions to a long term goal is enough. That is, we never have to do politics.

Burns' abstentionism and the rejection of existing political struggles by some base builders allowed a strategic hole to persist, even as "base building" became an exciting watchword in parts of the DSA. DSA members who opposed some or all of the organization's work on the Sanders campaign took up base building as a guiding principle, but this only squared the lack of a strategy that could be a compelling alternative to an all-in approach to the Sanders campaign. As a result, the 2019 DSA national convention became about a "yes, and" to the Sanders campaign, which was able to coexist with base building work, which would after all presumably build an electoral base for Sanders, No other strategic horizon, nor alternative vision for the role of electoral work, was on offer.

But now we are in completely different terrain. Sanders was defeated in his primary, and won't be running again. DSA once more requires a strategic horizon towards which to orient itself. The following article by our comrade Teresa Kalisz proposes something we have been grasping towards for years: a ruptural strategy that can fit the form of base building into the content of a revolutionary strategy.

Comrade Teresa's first development is to take our idea of rupture and crisis away from massive unpredictable events and towards the constant crises that beset working class life. By orienting ourselves towards and building within these 'everyday ruptures', we can start to build out our organizations in such a way that we can try to continually build on successive struggles. This requires organizations of a different type than what many DSA chapters have built. Chapters need to be built in a diverse way, both in terms of the practices they work on and in terms of the communities they reach into. This should not be done just because the DSA should reflect the diversity of the working class or a diversity of tactics, but because it allows us to be aware of and intervene into the lives of the communities we work in.

This is the heart of the ruptural strategy comrade Teresa proposes.

No revolution happens in a moment. By seeing the two possibilities we can move towards as "electing a socialist" or "storming the Winter Palace," we erase the path which can lead us to either reform or revolution. The successful election of Allende, the Rebel Army descending upon Havana, or the October Revolution, did not occur of their own. They were merely one in a series of moments. To get to a period like a revolution we cannot start with the tactics required at the point of revolution, with the slogans relevant at the point of revolution, with the organizations which only work at the point of revolution. We need to start here and now and build towards that moment. Building towards that moment does not *just* require base building or mutual aid. It requires that we use all the tools available to us. To infuse these tools with our politics, to work on mutual aid, on direct action or reform campaigns, on unionization and tenant unionization work, and even on electoral work, while working to inform people that it is only through the effort of the exploited and marginalized that we can shape society.

This does not mean opposing all electoral work, but recontextualizing it within a strategy focused on these imminent crises of working class life. In a Tribune article in 2020, Andrew Murray notes that "the core of the problem, politically, *is that the labour movement has ceased to exist in many of these communities*"[3], and this speaks to the fundamental weakness of our current strategy. If we take the crises of working class life and tell our comrades that this will be fixed through voting for some candidate, they will look to their own lives, and having seen no such instance of that occurring, will view us (perhaps rightfully) as wishful idealists. This problem cannot be fixed by developing some other policy program. It needs to be fixed by politicizing the crises of working class life, by building up political institutions of the working class. It requires taking 'working class politics' seriously.

When a rupture comes we move to the offensive, escalating our campaigns when our enemy is weakest. When a rupture abates we go back to base building, back to infusing politics into our base building and to preparing for the next rupture. By chaining these moments of preparation and offensives together and connecting socialist goals and working class power, we can not only create the road towards a viable socialist politics in the United States, but to a revolution. It is a lot of work, but if we choose not to make this road, if we choose to tread the paths we have already gone down, we will end up at the same point as we are now. We will be left asking, yet again, what do we do now? ■

Notes

1   Salame, Richard. " Texas Closes Hundreds of Polling Sites, Making It Harder for Minorities to Vote." The Guardian, Mar. 2020, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/02/texas-polling-sites-closures-voting.

2   Burns, Sophia. "For a Unity of Marxists, or a Unity of the Dispossessed." Cosmonaut, 21 Sept. 2019, cosmonaut.blog/2019/09/21/for-the-unity-of-marxists-or-the-unity-of-the-dispossessed/.

3   Murray, Andrew. "Assessing Defeat." Tribune, 8 Feb. 2020, tribunemag.co.uk/2020/02/assessing-defeat.

Everyday Ruptures:
Putting Base Building on a Revolutionary Path

Teresa Kalisz

Originally Published on Left Wind Blog

When the Marxist Center (MC)[1] was founded about a year and a half ago, it received immediate criticism from the more Maoist elements of our milieu. The now dissolved Austin Revolutionary Organizing Collective (AROC) criticized MC in a short reflection on our founding convention[2] for our lack of clarity on party building. In their critique, they point out how Marxist Center's use of the mass line and base building abstracts it away from its historical context of party building. Without a clear line on party building and revolution, Marxist Center doesn't offer anything new beyond what already exists in the NGO Left. And in all of this, they claim, we risk devolution into liberalism.

Much like Avery Minnelli in their response to AROC[3], I am deeply skeptical of the solutions offered by AROC. Party building becomes this silver bullet, this one organizational form that will solve the issues facing the left. But the revolutionary left has been party building for decades without much success. It certainly has not provided sufficient protection from liberalism, as can be seen from New Communist Movement party building efforts[4]. But there is something in the critiques raised by AROC,as well as criticisms from other comrades who have fallen away from the tendency, that ring true about this stage in the Marxist Center's development.

The Marxist Center as it currently stands is still a small collection of local/regional collectives. Since our merger, our work has remained local. This is certainly not a negative. If after our merger our work became purely based in national level politics, an organization of our size would lose the roots in communities with which we began. But, with the exception of our participation in the Autonomous Tenants Union Network and some labor organizing, we have yet to really cohere collaboration between our collectives or scale up our organizing.

This is a problem. The lack of serious collaboration between collectives indicates a general lack of organizational cohesion. This means that we can only respond to political developments collective by collective, rather than as an organization, if at all. Lack of cohesion means we are strategizing separately rather than together. This makes our use of resources inefficient and our organization on the whole less nimble. We can only respond to national developments, such as the current COVID-19 crisis, in an *ad hoc* and non-strategic manner. In the end, it also means most of our groups aren't in a different position than where they were when we first merged, which ultimately raises the question of why the Marxist Center exists in the first place.

This is particularly unfortunate because now is the time for Marxist Center's politics. The heavy emphasis of the broader left (the DSA, Socialist Alternative for example) on electoral work, especially during Bernie's campaign and over the last few years, has been revealed as inadequate, and unfit to meet the current task. The COVID-19 crisis has shown the need for extensive extra-electoral organizing in workplaces, tenants unions and mutual aid societies. While it is certainly true that Marxist Center are not only the advocates of this work, this work was the founding premise of the Marxist Center[5]. The COVID-19 crisis has vindicated the position of base builders from the 2017-2018 debates, and organizations and networks have reoriented *en masse* to mutual aid and tenant organizing tactics. This leads us to return to the earlier question: What does Marxist Center as an organization bring?

Marxist Center talks about organizing the unorganized and base building. These strategies are good and we support them, but we must recognize that the Marxist Center isn't the only one engaging in this strategy at this conjuncture. Organizing the unorganized and base building are two strategic tasks all healthy political organizations must take on, whether they are communist, socialist, or anarchist; even liberal groups often engage in base building. Marxist Center, by not going beyond these tactics and connecting them to a political vision, runs the very real risk of presenting ourselves and engaging our organizing in an apolitical way. This apolitical approach is a barrier to translating our base building work into meaningful working class politics, let alone Marxist revolutionary politics, in the world. It presents our work as a blank canvas on which any set of politics can be projected, resulting in a politically incoherent organization, and creating the conditions for potential pitfalls such as burn out, cooptation and degeneration, or, simply, collapse.

To answer the question of organizational cohesion and to answer the question of what the Marxist Center can offer, we need to develop a clear political vision and strategic orientation that goes beyond the immediate question of organizing the unorganized. This vision needs to grapple with the question of the state and our path to socialism.

The Terrain of the State

The question of the state is often tricky. Beyond the debates that began to spring up in the latter half of the 20th century, Marxists have not placed much emphasis on analyzing the state. Through specific interpretations of Lenin's *State and Revolution*[6], Marxists have arrived at positions on the capitalist state that are fairly similar to those held by anarchists[7]. The conclusions usually read that the capitalist state is a tool of class dictatorship over the working class, with a monopoly on legitimate force developed for the purpose of ensuring capital accumulation. This short definition captures many aspects of the state, especially emblematic in the violence of the police, military, and the courts, and the lengths gone to maintain capitalist property rights and the white supremacist and settler colonial structure of American capitalist society. This definition of the state can also be evidenced in the frequent corporate bailouts during capitalist crises, and the close personal relationships between state officials and capitalists (in many cases they are the same people!).

But this definition alone doesn't help us explain why the state functions this way, nor does it tell us how it maintains this legitimacy. This is why we must move beyond the definition offered by *State and Revolution* and into a deeper understanding of the state. A solution to the question of how the state maintains legitimacy is offered by French communist Louis Althusser[8]. In his analysis, the state does not just consist of repressive institutions but also Ideological State Apparatuses.

Where Repressive State Apparatuses function by violence, Ideological State Apparatus reproduce capitalist social relations by ideology. Ideological State Apparatuses can be clearly seen in the examples of school, state media, religious institutions, etc. However, the state doesn't merely engage in repression and ideology, nor is it only concerned purely with capital accumulation. It also engages in the reproduction of the working class, not just in terms of class relations and ideology, but in *the continued physical existence* of the working class, *and* in the infrastructure required for this social reproduction of the working class.

This is where models of the state for the revolutionary left start to feel disjointed. On the one hand, it is argued that reforms to capitalism are products of class struggle, not given to us nicely by the capitalist class, nor won just through electoral projects. In this way, reforms and the extension of state-run social welfare are seen as the weaknesses of capitalist power[9]. On the other hand, the lived reality of working class people in the welfare system is one of racism and repression. From physical violence, threatened or otherwise, faced by people of color and people with disabilities in the healthcare systems, to alienating and restrictive food and unemployment support, the violence of the state permeates the entire welfare apparatus. In view of this, some[10] Marxists[11] conclude that while for some workers state-run social welfare is better than relying on capitalists, it is still an aspect of the repressive functions of the state used to control the working class and reproduce oppressive class relations. However, if this were the case, then why are capitalist governments so quick to cut or jettison these programs? Are the reactionary roles played by these institutions inherent to them, or they an incidental byproduct of the deeper nature of the state?

Rather than looking at the state from the perspective of a tool, we should shift our perspective to begin to see the state as a social relation between the capitalist and working classes[12] which is rooted in the capitalist division of labor. So while, absolutely, the state is concerned about continued capital accumulation and the reproduction of the division of labor, once we view the state as a *social relation*, the state ceases to be a monolithic set of institutions which the working class confront externally on the terrain of class struggle. Rather, the state is itself constituted by class struggle, wherein class contradictions permeate its institutions. It is by adding this layer of understanding that we can account for why welfare institutions have this dual character. It is not that welfare institutions are *products* of working class victory or tools of capitalist domination, but it is the *manifestation* of class struggle within those institutions.

To return to the classical view, if we view the state as purely a tool of the capitalist class, how do we account for the historic ability for democratic socialists to establish governments and enact reforms and policies within the state that aren't coherent with the concept of the state as a mere tool of capitalist class? It should be noted that these democratic socialist governments have faced large backlashes and have almost all been defeated by capitalist reaction within the state itself. These experiences are not just limited to the imperial core where theories of imperialism and labor aristocracy might account for the flexibility. We can look to the Bolivarian revolution and other Pink Tide governments to which the revolutionary, or at least Leninist, left has provided support to see evidence that the classical formulas break down. The relational view for which we argue allows for us to see the relative autonomy of state institutions from the capitalist class. As class struggle traverses the state, socialists might be able to gain control of specific institutions, but this is often limited as the class struggle continues and capitalist power regroups and launches counter offensive measures.

Furthermore, in seeing the state as a social relation, a relation of power between the capitalist and working classes, we see that the state extends beyond the reach of its formal institutions, not just into now formally independent religious institutions but also into NGOs which take over the social reproductive roles of the state. This is important to our analysis because it shows that reductions in state-run social welfare during periods of austerity do not indicate a weakening or shrinking of the state. Instead, the state is in actuality much larger and permeates so many aspects of working class life, through its tendrils of control in religious institutions, NGOs, and other such "civil society" institutions.

The state is not something the working class or communists can avoid or meet purely from the outside. The idea that we can avoid the effects of the state by organizing away from it is an illusion. Whether we like it or not, the state defines the terrain on which we wage social struggles and, in many ways, workplace struggles. This does not mean we must accept or join the social democratic march through the institutions. On the contrary, this understanding of the state as a social relation allows for the development of a strategic orientation towards revolution, a foundation which extends beyond the limitations of the various insurrectionary and prefigurative conceptions of dual power and electoral roads to socialism.

Which Way to Socialism?

In the debate on how we get to socialism, two sides generally appear. First is "the democratic road to socialism," which can take different forms. On one end of the spectrum there are social democratic visions of this road, which emphasize socialist parties utilizing the state as a neutral tool in order to enact a series of progressive reforms which would transition capitalist society, gradually, to socialism. On the other end of the spectrum you have the democratic road of the (left)

eurocommunist[15] traditions[14], which seek to unite socialist electoral projects with a robust labor movement, with the goal of forming a government and, through an inside/outside strategy, work to transform and democratize the state, thereby carrying out the transition to socialism. This latter version has been increasingly popular among democratic[15] socialists[16].

The second side of the debate over how we get to socialism is often represented by the dual power strategies. Dual power strategies may vary in their visions, but they share the idea that socialists cannot transform the existing state, seeing it as a tool of capitalist domination. Therefore, the working class must build up a power that could stand in opposition to the existing state, and which, at a point of great crisis and rupture, can overthrow the existing state and reorganize society. The two main forms of dual power strategy that this piece will focus on are the insurrectionary and prefigurative forms. These are the two major tendencies that have arisen within the Marxist Center, as well as in the DSA, in traditional Leninist groups like the Party for Socialism and Liberation, or in anarchist trends like Symbiosis.

Both democratic road and dual power strategies face serious obstacles. The democratic road is by its nature a strategic long game. While the electoral insurgencies that we have seen can build the energy needed to initiate a serious socialist electoral project, such a project would need to win thousands of electoral races from the municipal to the federal level in order to achieve an electoral road to socialism. This requires time and a lot of sustained energy and organization. This isn't inherently a negative, but we also don't know what the future may hold as the scale of the environmental crisis progresses. Even now, Hungary, a consistent canary in the coal mine with respect to the ascendance of the far right and an EU member, has experienced a

parliamentary coup during the COVID-19 crisis. Its prime minister, Victor Orban, has gained the ability to rule by decree indefinitely with parliament suspended. Any claims about the stability of bourgeois democracy should be taken with a grain of salt.

This does not mean that a socialist electoral project is unviable, but rather it means that we should take seriously the potential reality that we might be blocked from gaining major footholds in the institutions of representative democracy yet again. This did, in fact, happen at the municipal scale in the aftermath of the last major crisis. In the state of Michigan, state-appointed emergency financial managers took over powers from multiple city councils and, in one case, locked the city council out entirely.

Another limit of the electoral road in the United States is the U.S. Constitution. This is a place where advocates of both strategies fundamentally agree. In his article "Constitution and Class Struggle"[17], Chris Maisano highlights how the architects of the U.S. Constitution designed it explicitly to hinder the ability of majoritarian movements to transform society. This was accomplished through a separation of powers between a powerful executive branch, a judiciary branch which was given the power to strike down laws on the basis of their constitutionality (or lack thereof), and a divided legislative branch which checks the potential of popular movements to form majorities in the lower house with a more aristocratic upper house, as well as the enshrinement of property rights. For an electoral road to be successful, it must either radically reform or get rid of the existing constitution. In order to accomplish either of these, a socialist electoral project would have to not only win a supermajority of seats in Congress at the federal level, but also in the state governments. A simple majority is not enough political power to radically change the Constitution, and it is unrealistic to assume that even a

widely popular socialist movement would manage to build and sustain such state-level victories over the length of time required to achieve them. In his piece, Chris Maisano recognizes this problem:

> *Given the egregiously high barriers to calling a constitutional convention or amending the current constitution, a demand for a wholly new constitution would be utopian.*

Does all this mean that electoral participation is not useful for the working class struggle for socialism? Absolutely not; a dual power strategy is compatible with engaging in electoral activity. However, it does mean that the democratic road is not viable as a road to socialism.

Projections for the dual power strategy don't fare any better. In the insurrectionary model[18], a crisis of authority develops between the existing capitalist state and an external working class power that results in an insurrectionary overthrow of the capitalist state to be replaced by new institutions of working class rule. These new institutions are either present in the build up to the crisis (potentially aiding and giving form to the working class power), or are established after the victory of the revolutionary forces. The problem with this model is that it places too much emphasis on massive systemic crises in capitalist society and the prediction of the formation of workers councils/soviets during these times of crisis. Certainly, systemic crises do occur, and we shouldn't overestimate the power and stability of the legitimacy of the capitalist state. But crises of this size are both hard to predict and beyond our control. They also don't necessarily develop into moments of revolutionary rupture. If we are depending on the occurrence of a potentially far off systemic crisis, and on specific organizational forms that might come into existence in the lead up to this crisis, there is not a path for us to tread to go from here to there.. We can only prepare for that moment by trying to radicalize the workers' movement.

Consciousness-raising and organizing within unions for more space for radical activity, or even for building new, more radical worker organizations are important activities for socialists, but they have their limits. At best, they provide us with a way to develop in parts the prerequisite working class militancy needed for a left of any size to exist.

Because of these contradictions, the prefigurative[19] model[20] seems on the surface more preferable. It recognizes the importance of organizing, and understands that mass unrest doesn't necessarily translate into organization. The prefigurative model asserts that we must build working class institutions of counterpower and alternative power. Institutions of counterpower are organizations such as revolutionary unions or tenants unions that fight the boss, landlords, or state, or provide protection from them. Institutions of alternative power are organizations which provide alternatives to the state in the form of mutual aid, workers and buyers cooperatives, community clinics, etc. Organizing in the prefigurative model is conducted at a distance from the state, understood as something external to the working class. But this strategy underestimates the state's ability to co-opt radical projects. These organizations of counter- and alternative power can just as easily be co-opted, as they prove inefficient in competing with the resources of the state and so seek funding grants from liberal funds in order to survive. Or else, the state may integrate them into the social welfare system. We only need to look at the movement history of the 1930s and 1970s, how various radical alternative institutions and grassroots movements became agents of distribution of services for the state[21].

Advocates of the prefigurative model promote the development of our own healthcare clinics as an alternative to medicare for all. But consider the recent example of the Culinary Workers Union in Las Vegas, who used the defense of their medical clinics to support centrist candidates against Bernie Sanders[22] because of his advocacy for a universal healthcare system. While the CWU has long been allied with capitalist politicians, this example does show how our own alternative institutions can be co-opted not just to become agents of welfare distribution for the state, but also as a defense for capitalist austerity.

The combination of an opposition to protesting and a focus on developing institutions that act as an alternative to state- or capitalist-provided services can lead to a drift of resources from organizations of counterpower to the alternative institutions. The gradual expansion of the alternative institutions can start increasing in priority as the organizations of counterpower run into the limits of a strategy which doesn't engage the state and opposes reforms. Since the alternative institutions are already conceived as a replacement for the existing capitalist, this can easily morph into a vision of building a new society in the shell of the old. Rather than a revolution, a new reformism is born that sees a gradual disengagement from capitalism through workers' associations, cooperatives, and community gardens as means to supplant capitalism regardless of the revolutionary pretenses of the organizations.

Beyond just the threat of a new reformism, this strategy will still lead us to a similar problem as in the 'insurrectionary' model: there is still a gap between the work that happens right now and the future revolutionary crisis. At what point do our organizations of dual power constitute actual dual power? What even guarantees that the organizations that we build will become the organizations of dual power? Before WW1, the German Social Democrats had an intensive infrastructure of alternative institutions and unions and, when push came to shove, it was not these gymnasiums, pioneer clubs, party schools, or affiliated unions that lead to the German

Revolution, it was the networks and new organizations born during the war years and the mutinying sailors[23] which launched and carried out the revolution. The German Social Democrats' alternative institutions played an important role in building and developing the movement, but they did not constitute the infrastructure of the dual power situation. Rather than elevating a series of organizational or tactical tools to the throne of 'strategy,' or surrendering the question of revolution to far off systemic crises, we need to develop an adaptable strategy for revolution that builds on the organizing we are currently engaged in while also providing a bridge to the moment of revolution.

Towards a Strategy of Everyday Ruptures

In *Envisioning Real Utopias*[24], Erik Olin Wright describes what he called the ruptural transformation of capitalism. The approach of ruptural transformation is to radically break with existing social institutions and structures, destroy them, and then build new ones in their place. While he allows for the potential of limited ruptural moments within institutions, Wright argues that the strength and robustness of the state in capitalist democracies makes these systemic ruptural moments improbable. By limiting our understanding of ruptures outside of state institutions to large systemic ruptures, we lose sight of smaller and more immediate weak points in capitalist hegemony and legitimacy. We need to see ruptures in a broader sense. Mass protests and social movements present moments of ruptural potential. Meanwhile, longer crisis events born of class antagonism, racism, and non-human causes such as disease or natural disaster may also cause temporary radical breaks or breakdowns of hegemonic politics and social functions. We see this occur during riots, environmental crises, and the current COVID-19 crisis.

Critics of insurrectionary models of revolution that depend on a large systemic rupture, like Erik Olin Wright and Eric Blanc[25], argue that any revolutionary force pursuing such a model will be opposed by the majority of the population and won't be able to compete with the legitimacy of the capitalist state, as evidenced by the lack of any successful insurrectionary movement in the West. Because of this, according to Wright and Blanc, we must abandon our hope for an all-out attack on the capitalist state, and instead make use of institutions of representative democracy united with an external labor movement to transform society. By taking advantage of a broader vision of ruptures, we can press the fractures in the state and erode the legitimacy of state institutions in small bursts of direct conflict during these limited ruptural moments.

But we can't immediately engage in direct conflict with state institutions or even with capitalists. We need organization to build trust among and mobilize workers, to plan and focus our attack, and to defend ourselves and the class against reprisals.

In order to conceptualize the process better and how it relates to struggles under moments of rupture, we need to borrow two related concepts from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci[26]: war of position and war of maneuver. Gramsci took these terms from the military theory of his time. The war of maneuver is when an army engages in direct assaults on its enemy. The war of position takes place when direct assaults are not possible and the army must bunker down in trenches. This metaphor was used to explain the difference between revolutions in the east (i.e. Russia) and in the west. In the east, the capitalist state was weak and could be fought directly, whereas, in the west, the capitalist state was too strong to be fought directly. So for that reason, in the west, revolutionaries had to take on a war of position in the trenches that run through the state and civil society.

In this analysis, one can see hints of Wright's argument against ruptural transformation. In fact, others[27] before him made this argument, too. It was not just that revolutionaries *should* engage in a war of position, but that war of position was the only means possible. And this war of position involved a struggle within institutions of representative democracy via elections, but also on the level of cultural hegemony. But if we look deeper into the metaphor in Gramsci's writings, the war of position isn't about a slow slog through the institutions, but of building up a military machine and developing supply lines. Nor was it meant to be a permanent state of revolutionary struggle. Instead, the war of position is what makes the war of maneuver possible. They are a part of the same process[28]. In this way, the war of position is the same base building that the Marxist Center has strongly emphasized in its strategy to date. By locating potentials for rupture, we can engage in fluid transitions from war of position to limited periods of war of maneuver and back.

During periods of war of position, revolutionaries must build up both our defensive and offensive structures. This will take the form of developing new working class organizations, such as new grassroots unions and radical tenants unions, as well as mutual aid organizations and cooperatives. They are also the time to secure our positions. This is done through building radical nucleuses in workplaces, communities, within existing working class organizations, and politicizing the informal networks in the working class in which we find ourselves working, living, and organizing. This work builds up our forces, deepens our roots, and furthers the politicization of the working class in the places we live and beyond in anticipation of the next ruptural wave.

It is when the next ruptural moment comes that we shift into a war of maneuver. In this, we mobilize the organizations and the working class communities in which we have been working, living, and organizing and fight to win more ground. This "ground" can mean sets of reforms that improve the lives of workers and weaken the state or the power of capitalists, advancing popular working class democracy, or shifting more power to workers. Beyond gaining ground, it also provides us with opportunities to press the fractures and faultlines within the state. Each period of rupture will be different and what is possible during these moments will vary.

As the moment of rupture begins to ebb, rather than fighting to prolong the rupture beyond what is sustainable (this should be seen as different from fighting repression meant to pacify the class), we start to shift back into the war of position to secure what gains we have made: solidify any increase in membership through political education and development, rebuild from any losses suffered during the period of rupture, and reflect on the experiences of the ruptural period. By having this cyclical understanding of periods of ruptures and lulls, we can connect our base building work to a political and strategic context. In this context, base building must be political. Without a clear political component, base building can just as easily operate by creating service provision organizations without increasing the political power and organization of the working class as a whole, and leaves those efforts open to be co-opted by liberal sentiments of civic participation[29].

While these moments of rupture are hard to predict or even notice until they have broken out, base building and the use of tools like the mass line and workers inquiry can train our organizational fingers on the pulse of the working class. As our organizations grow stronger and more entrenched in the class, we will become more aware of pressing issues in the communities we work within, which will allow us to start pressing contradictions and arrive at an increasing awareness of the points of politicization existing within emerging ruptures. By engaging in a protracted war of position,

in which we engage in base building as our primary organizing mode, we can develop the needed capacity, organization, and deep roots to sufficiently merge with the class to accomplish this in ways that a war of position predicated primarily on elections with extra-electoral work as secondary cannot. Electoral campaigns are too ephemeral, with extended periods of time in between, to create long-term infrastructure and to consistently assess the state of the working class. At best, during periods of crisis like the one we are in now, electoral campaigns can broadcast work being done outside of the electoral sphere and, outside of crises, engage in limited social investigation.

This ruptural view has two other strengths. First, it allows space for working class initiative outside of the communist political organization, either via rupture caused by spontaneous initiative of the class in response to actions of capitalists or the state (i.e. protesting), or by other working class organizations and networks. While communist organizations are still small, it is unlikely that we will be at the leading edge of actions that open moments of rupture or, at most, we will be a small component of it. A sectarian approach would reject social movements or initiatives beyond our control. But limiting our political activity to that which directly derives from our base building provides us with little way to make sense of or engage moments of rupture or social movements. By anticipating the need to respond to moments of rupture beyond our control and connecting that anticipation to our revolutionary base building, we maintain strategic flexibility while not devolving into protest chasers or movementism[30]. As our strength grows, we can begin to take more initiative and open up moments of rupture of our own.

The other strength is that it provides a bridge from now to revolution. Without a conception of how we get from here to socialism, our base building work can just as easily become a constituency building effort for an electoral project[31]. In other dual power

strategies that have appeared in Marxist Center or around us, the revolution takes on this mythical quality, becoming this messianic moment where everything comes into play. But by organizing around cycles of periodic rupture and lulls, with each cycle our power and organizational strength will expand and the balance of power will shift; the moment of revolutionary rupture is now only unique in the sense that it's the cycle where the balance of power has decisively shifted and the capitalist forces are routed. Each cycle, even in situations where we experience defeat, provides a link to this moment of revolutionary rupture. It is important to note that the ruptural strategy that has been outlined here also allows us to confront the realities of historical revolutions. Revolutions are hardly singular events or moments of rupture. During the Russian Revolution, in 1917 there were several major moments of revolutionary ruptures[32]. The Chinese Revolution also consisted of periods of rupture, such as the revolutionary period of 1927[33], followed by protracted periods of base building and combat before the victory of communist forces in 1949[34].

The two general trends previously touched on in this piece both had definitive statements on the question of what to do with the capitalist state. For the electoral road, the existing state institutions are something to be taken over and transformed. In this process of transformation, they become more democratic and adapted to meeting the needs of society rather than the interests of capitalists and capital accumulation. In the case of dual power strategies, the state is seen as irreformable, capitalist to its core. It must be smashed and replaced by a new workers state, which will itself fade away as capitalism and the residue of its class order are done away with. Both of these, as we have seen, have clear limits.

The ruptural strategy for socialism takes a more flexible approach. Rather than focusing on eventually smashing or transformation of the state,

its emphasis is on breaking the relations of power that run through the state, taking advantage of the non-monolithic nature of the state, and the faultlines that run through it. So rather than wait for a final battle in which the working class forces with its alternative state/power will smash the capitalist state, the ruptural strategy chips away at the state and the power expressed through it. The build up of working class power becomes inextricably linked to the processes of eroding the power of capitalists and the capitalist state.

The ruptural strategy also doesn't surrender the need to transform the state. This shouldn't be taken to mean the wholesale transformation of the existing state institutions, but rather a recognition that certain institutions are unlikely to disappear, or at least it is infeasible to create a wholesale replacement. These particular institutions — schools, public transportation, public healthcare — already have the working class embedded in them. It is the struggles of the working class, as workers, students, patients, or transit riders, against those who run those institutions which are the backbone of the transformation of these institutions. Each moment of rupture ignites new opportunities to push forward with the transformation and democratization of these institutions. As working class power expands and the power of the capitalist class and its control over society are increasingly under threat, each cycle of rupture provides the working class and revolutionaries

all the more space to experiment with new forms organizing society. Rather than creating a prepackaged new system of governance, or waiting for these forms to magically appear, we forge them through cycles and ruptures: stress testing them, developing new ones as previous forms prove insufficient or as new struggles provide new opportunities.

Finding Our Footing

Previous dual power strategies have left us with organizations that struggle to engage in non-revolutionary times, in hope that a future major systemic crisis or rupture will launch the left into a final battle with the state. These crises are always seemingly beyond the horizon. If we stick to our previous strategies, we are either forced to accept the social democratic consensus on the impossibility of revolution, or the marginality of revolutionaries. We are left feeling lost, and our practical work has no clear direction.

But by locating the small moments of rupture outside of systemic crises, we are able to work to erode capitalist power and, in the process, build working class power. It is in navigating the related cycles of war of position and war of maneuver that we are able to give base building its revolutionary content. This strategy will allow us, finally, to begin to think in the long term, to go past a *belief* in the possibility of revolution and to begin practicing towards its *reality*. ■

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III. Practices

Introduction to Practices

Jean RD Allen

So if we are to follow the strategy of Everyday Ruptures: look to hyperlocal crises, build within them while politicizing this work, that gives us a rough outline of how to pursue our work. However, there is a general problem with strategies that lack a partisan bias towards some specific sets of practices, which is that without a single thing *to do* it can seem difficult to implement such a strategy at the level of a local organization. Despite this, it is desperately important that our movement be a multi-practical one, which can intervene in and politicize all spheres of the struggle.

In that spirit, we have included two articles, one on reform struggles and one on the rank and file strategy. This is not an argument that reform and labor struggles are the totality of what the Communist left should embark on; mutual aid, militant protest, and tenant unionism are all crucially important to our movement. We included these specific pieces because, although reform work and labor work have both been widely discussed in the socialist sphere, the arguments around these practices have seldom come to the level of actual strategic thinking.

This is especially the case with electoral work, where the left wing of the DSA and parts of Marxist

Center have adopted a position opposed to any form of electoral work. This is not necessarily a wrongheaded opinion, but the argument over whether to engage in reform work has had the effect of crowding out the conversation of what reform work is *for,* of how to distinguish between socialistic and co-optive reform struggles. Without that conversation, without developing these rubrics, socialist organizations, even 'anti-electoral' ones, are ironically more vulnerable to subsumption into co-optive reform campaigns. Understanding that *how* these reform campaigns occur is just as important as the ends they fight for, understanding how the goal of a reform campaign is connected to the end goal of our efforts, all of this is crucial to any practice we engage in.

The same is true of Labor work, which has had significantly more strategic conversations around it, starting in the 90s and escalating around the 2019 Democratic Socialists of America convention, between a 'Rank and File' strategy, a more traditional labor strategy and an 'Organizing the Unorganized' strategy. Each of these proposals passed at the convention, indicating a strategic impasse which requires more thought. Doyle-Griffith excellently describes the ways that union work applies to and is interlinked with the sphere of

social reproduction and goes further to analyze the way that socialists can more effectively agitate within their workplaces in this environment of increased politicization and labor militancy.

As I noted, these are not the only practices socialists are involved in. We intend to include other reportbacks and reflections in future dossiers. But what is key here is not so much what practices we use, but understanding the way that the work we do connects to the conditions we organize in and the goal we strive towards. All of our tactics are tools by which we create socialism. To argue against a practice a priori is to be a smith arguing that nails are the devil's instruments. We need to understand the way each of these practices can be used, the way they teach us, in order to develop an understanding of the way we make the revolution within our actual everyday lives. ■

Rethinking Reforms

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The Trump election brought numerous horrifying political developments in the federal government as well as the growth of (organized) fascist violence. However, the growth of the left and workers' struggles counter those serious developments[1]. The declaration of the "death of the left and the working class" seems to have been premature given the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a new wave of elected officials who are self-identified socialists and members of socialist organizations, a wave of teachers' strikes, and new organizing in the social sphere to list a few counter-narratives. These inspiring developments surface questions of reforms and reformism with different political contexts and meanings. The question of reformism is no longer a question of posturing among small groups– it has real strategic significance in the here and now as well as long-term implications that are more real today than they have been for decades. In this context, advocates of electoral paths to socialism have outlined their strategy that places great importance on non-reformist and universal reforms.

In a brief intervention into this debate, Tim Horras from Philly Socialists makes an argument against the strategy of non-reformist reforms in his article "Reforms are just reforms".[2] In it, Horras argues that non-reformist reforms make reforms out to be something they are not. While certain reforms may have a positive impact on the working class, they do not add up over time

and weaken capitalism. Our ability to win reforms does not readily translate into our ability to end capitalism. Reforms are, in the end, just reforms. While Horras is correct to push back against the almost teleological view of reforms presented by advocates of non-reformist reforms, his alternative view leaves much to be desired. In trying to break from a linear connection between the struggle for reforms and socialist transition, Horras ends up leaving a gap between our current struggles and our long-term goals. Horras's criticisms reproduce key errors of the argument for the non-reformist reforms he denounces. Instead of a rejection of non-reformist reforms that takes the reformist account on its own terms, we need a new strategy for approaching questions of reforms that takes into account the flaws of the non-reformist reform framework.

Problem with Non Reformist Reforms

People from a wide-range of tendencies on the left adapt "non-reformist reforms" to their needs, often superficially. To provide some clarity, I will highlight two of the main uses. Philosopher and journalist Andre Gorz developed the concept of non-reformist reforms.[3] For Gorz, reformist reforms are reforms that are reconciled with the needs of the capitalist class. They do not seek to undermine the capitalist system as opposed to "non reformist reforms" which are reforms that directly attack capitalism with the goal of destroying it.

Contemporary advocates of non-reformist reforms take this a step further. They position reforms that not only weaken capital but also make it more possible for the working class to organize and assert their power. The current popular reform that is touted as a non-reformist reform is Medicare for All. The advocates of this view assert that nationalizing health insurance, hospitals, and medical services would severely weaken capitalists' hold on the working class.[4][5] Workers would no longer

have to worry about losing their healthcare if they were to lose their job by going on strike or trying to organize. This would embolden workers to take more risks.

Both the strategy of non-reformist reforms as formulated by Gorz and by current proponents are deeply flawed. Not just that, current proponents present a version that misrepresents and misuses Gorz. However, before getting into any criticism of either conception of non-reformist reforms, it's important to recognize the obvious if partial truth of the second formulation. Laws and reforms clearly impact class struggle and working-class organizations. Laws like Taft-Hartley[6] make militant action difficult. Repealing such laws would free workers from the negative consequences of shop floor and direct action. Similarly, one cannot deny that reforms which make workers less precarious during strike action and organizing make these things easier to do.

The problem is that the reality of reforms, whether they have reformist or non-reformist intention, is very different. According to both Gorz and current proponents of non-reformist reforms, the strategy depends on the reforms being winnable.[7][8] The winnability of a reform does not speak to the exact content of a reform when it gets enacted. Reforms will often contain concessions to capitalism– its more radical elements watered down– and new provisions added. This is a risk when dealing with reforms that are won by means that do not create high stakes for capitalists and the government if they do not enact the reform. Until the strength and organizational level of the working class is such that it creates these challenges to capitalists and the state, any major reform is going to be much more limited if enacted than the proponents of non-reformist reforms envision.

Non-reformist reforms as advocated by Gorz run into the issue of the limitations of using the capitalist state as a vehicle for transition, movements

losing steam, and the socialist coalition caving and reconciling with capitalists. Whereas contemporary advocates are even more vulnerable to these issues as they attempt to make limited reforms without a strong mass working-class movement, the potential for institutionalization and compromise is great, a danger that Gorz heavily warns against. For Gorz, the strategy already assumes a mature workers movement, one that has had numerous shows of strength through things such as mass strikes. Gorz explicitly states "[i]f the socialist revolution is not immediately possible, neither is the realization of reforms immediately destructive of capitalism".[9] Reforms that are immediately destructive to capitalism are what non-reformist reforms are by Gorz's original formulation. This is clearly distinct from what contemporary advocates present as non-reformist reforms and refers to a very different articulation of class struggle. Instead, the current use of "non-reformist reforms" refers to reforms meant to help kick start or facilitate the process of growth and strengthening of the working-class movement before it is able to bring capitalism to the brink of destruction. The reforms they advocate are not especially disruptive let alone destructive to capitalism as we can see with single-payer health care and the Medicare for All campaign.

The actual policy of Medicare for All put forward by advocacy groups is very limited, the actual bill even more so. It does not put forward a nationalization of insurance, only the expansion of a public option, leaving private insurance companies relatively untouched.[10] It does not involve nationalization of hospitals and other treatment facilities. Even if it were to include all those things, the model for a more complete Medicare for All that advocates point to– the British and Swedish national healthcare services[11]– demonstrate that such a reform does not actually threaten and destabilize capitalism. A national healthcare service does not decommodify healthcare as advocates claim. While it makes healthcare accessible, it does not touch pharmaceuticals—outside of limited price controls—or tech industries attached to health care which pressure the nationalized aspects of health care policy through market influences. Medicare for All and single-payer fall short of the standards of a non-reformist reform.

By labeling reforms as non-reformist in nature, we lose sight of the fact that reforms that we win do not on their own translate into increased working-class militancy or organizing. After winning a reform, the working class could demobilize, leaving no permanent organization. Even worse, as a part of the compromise, provisions might be included that could end creating new avenues for the capitalist class or state to fight or prevent class struggle. Reforms can themselves be applied in ways that increase divisions among the working class along the lines of race[12] or legal status.[13] However, if the working class forms an organization that can sustain militancy to resist attempts to introduce such measures and reignite struggles if subsequent laws are pushed through to neuter the previous victory, long-term impacts of the compromises can be swung in favor of workers.

In the end, what determines outcomes and long-term impacts of a reform is not the content of the reform itself (though it is not irrelevant) but how the struggle is fought and the ability of the working class to continue fighting. The value of a particular reform is not in its ability to destabilize capitalism or strengthen workers in the abstract as there is always a gap between the hypothetical reform and the reform in reality. Contemporary advocates in trying to shoehorn the strategy of non-reformist reforms into a context in which they were explicitly not meant for both abstract and specific reforms from reality and gloss over real dangers or strategic barriers that can have far reaching repercussions. The value of a reform comes from its relationship to class struggle and concrete changes in the balance of forces between the working class and the capitalist class.

Blind Spots of Reforms are Just Reforms

As I have shown above there are many flaws with the non-reformist reform framework. However, the alternative view that Horras provides to non-reformist reforms presents an equally flawed and simplistic view. For Horras, reforms are concessions that capitalists are forced to give but are still things that are fundamentally compatible with the capitalist system. In this way, Horras and advocates of non-reformist reforms see reforms through their positive impacts on the working class– in Horras's case, as concessions limited by capitalism and what capitalists are willing to give. This presents reforms in an uncomplicated manner, ignoring their internal contradictions

Because reforms are products of class struggle, compromises between the working class and capitalists are mere concessions. They are not independent from larger class struggles. Reforms can have long-term impact on class struggle. Advocates of non-reformist reforms discovered a rational kernel in this perspective, but this impact is not always positive. A reform might give workers greater protections or improve their lives but might also set up institutions or pathways that make collective or militant struggle harder or even deepen divisions in class along race or legal status. Horras's formulation ignores this. In his attempt to push back against the ways contemporary advocates of non reformist reforms misrepresent the nature of specific reforms, he ignores the long-term impact of reforms on class struggle. If these impacts were just positive, this blind spot would not be serious, but these impacts have the potential to severely undermine the working class. To have this blind spot is dangerous.

To the extent that Horras does recognize that reforms are compromises, they do not impact the fundamental relationship or shift the balance of power. This is a problem in two ways. First, it falls into the same problem as above, as it's not just that capitalists will try to protect their power but also create new methods of exerting that power to control the working class. Secondly, it is not true that reforms do not impact the balance of power or how the capitalist class is able to exert its power. Democratic reforms– limits placed on the functioning of oppressive wings of the state and reforms that allow for more freedom in organizing– all impact the ability of the capitalist class to wield power both in and outside of the confines of the state. Through these reforms, the balance of power can shift, even slightly, more in favor of workers. This matters for how we think about the relationship between reforms and class struggle. This should not lead us to believe that reforms in and of themselves can destabilize capitalism or stack in such a way that allows us to exit capitalism nor should we see the state as the primary means to advance workers' interests. However, it does mean that we can and should think about this potentially strategic relationship

This is where Horras creates a massive strategic gap. By ignoring the long-term impact that reforms can have on class struggle and power in general, a divide is created between our everyday practice of fighting for reforms or concessions and our long-term revolutionary goals. There is nothing that links our practical work to revolution, and revolution becomes relegated to advocacy. It is not desirable to imagine that reforms are something that they are not. However, they produce interest in "non-reformist reforms" or "transitional demands" to address the very real problem of needing to link everyday work to the revolution. The more that revolution becomes something distant and detached from everyday strategy, the more room there is for reformism to position itself as the realistic practice and subsequently, the more reformist our practice becomes itself.

This reality produces another danger: an outright rejection of struggles for reforms. If reforms and

revolution have little connection, well-intentioned revolutionaries might arrive to the conclusion that struggling for reforms will always lead to reformism and is then something to be opposed. For base building organizations, this can lead to a vision of producing organizations that take provide alternative services as a means to build up an alternative state. These organizations are vulnerable to succumbing to pressures from the market or the need for funding and support that can lead them to latch onto the state or in search of wealthy donors.

It is not enough to reject the assumptions of non-reformist reforms. We must produce a different strategic relationship to reforms and fights in and around the state. This is vital if we want to link our practical work outside of revolutionary situations to our long-term goals.

Alternatives

Unlike democratic socialists whose strategy is based around working through the existing state (and in the process transforming it), revolutionaries have always maintained a need to smash the capitalist state. This position when combined with the realities facing us in this age of austerity and when our programs include reforms that expand the reach of the state creates a difficult dilemma. This dilemma is not a new one. Stuart Hall described a similar situation within the context of intense austerity of the Thatcher government.

"On the one hand, we not only defend the welfare side of the state, we believe it should be massively expanded. And yet, on the other hand, we feel there is something deeply anti-socialist about how this welfare state functions. We know, indeed, that it is experienced by masses of ordinary people, in the very moment that they are benefiting from it, as an intrusive managerial, bureaucratic force in

their lives. However, if we go too far down that particular road, whom do we discover keeping us company along the road but—of course—the Thatcherites, the new Right, the free market 'hot gospellers,' who seem (whisper it not too loud) to be saying rather similar things about the state. Only they are busy making capital against us on this very point, treating widespread popular dissatisfaction with the modes in which the beneficiary parts of the state function as fuel for an anti-Left, 'roll back the state' crusade. And where, to be honest, do we stand on the issue? Are we for 'rolling back the state'– including the welfare state? Are we for or against the management of the whole of society by the state? Not for the first time, Thatcherism here catches the Left on the hop– hopping from one uncertain position to the next, unsure of our ground."[14]

This contradiction has also been noted by opponents of revolutionary roads to socialism[15], using it to counterposition unrealistic revolutionary strategies to more realistic roads through the existing state. If we propose a genuine alternative to social democratic and democratic road strategies, we cannot simply appropriate their orientation to reforms nor can we ignore the need to bridge the gap between our struggle for reforms and our revolutionary goals. Nonetheless, rigid models for revolution that seek to shoehorn strategies and mindsets for periods of revolutionary upheaval to our non-revolutionary context are also not helpful. As Marxist political sociologist and philosopher Nicos Poulantzas noted in State, Power, and Socialism: "A 'model' of the State of transition to socialism cannot be drawn up: not as a universal model capable of being concretized in given cases, nor even as an infallible, theoretically guaranteed recipe for one or several countries. [...] We have to make a choice once and for all: and as we now know, one cannot ask any theory, however scientific it may be,

to give more than it possesses—not even Marxism, which remains a genuine theory of action. There is always a structural distance between theory and practice, between theory and the real."

An orientation to reforms has to be grounded in the material. A rigid model— no matter how clever— will always face the divide between an abstract conceptualization and the concrete reality of implementation. To bring the gap between the present and a future revolutionary moment, I propose a set of questions to orient our work for reforms:

1. How is the struggle for a reform being fought?

2. What sections of the working class are engaging in the struggle?

3. What organizational forms is the struggle creating?

4. Is this struggle putting pressure on fault lines in the State?

How is the struggle for the reform being fought?

There are a variety of methods for socialists and the working class to utilize in their fight for reforms. These methods can involve more or less engagement from the working class. One particularly popular method today is canvassing. Canvassing is a popular method among liberal advocacy groups. Often meant to educate people about why particular reforms are necessary and to encourage people to contact their legislators in support of a particular bill or to vote in a certain way to help get a reform passed. Similarly, another popular strategy among labor bureaucrats and liberal advocacy groups is direct lobbying. While this is the primary mode for liberal engagement in politics, the left has also made extensive use of this. For the DSA, one major campaign is canvassing for Medicare for All.[16] In the end, this method requires that workers remain fairly passive and

are relatively ineffective, especially when faced with a government that is either uncaring or outright hostile to reforms.

Alternatively, one can run left-wing candidates for elected office. Once elected, they can introduce reforms. While having elected officials can help with the passage of reforms, the small number of elected officials we currently have is insufficient to get any major reform passed on their own, especially given the lack of independent organizational structure to support them. Even if we did have a significant number, there is a long history of barriers that left electoral projects have been faced with due to structural pressures of the state. These failures can have a negative impact on broader working class struggle, leaving the movements that brought them into government demobilized or demoralized.

In the end, in order to get reforms passed, especially in a form that closer to original demands, our mode of struggle must impose high costs for not compromising with us. It is often noted by all sections of the left, including Democratic roaders, that strikes are the most effective way for workers to win demands. This is true not only from individual capitalists but also the state. Just recently, West Virginia teachers, when faced with a bill that would attack public education, chose to strike. After one day on strike, the bill was indefinitely tabled.[17] Recognizing this, when we face the question of engaging in a struggle for a reform, revolutionaries need to focus on organizing tasks that can make strikes and other militant actions more possible. This can include— but is certainly not limited to— building a network on militants within workplaces and communities capable of creating support infrastructure that can fight attempts to wait out strikes, building connections between the community and workplaces to bring the widest range of people into solidarity and limit attempts to drive wedges between sections of the working class.

What sections of the class are engaging in the struggle?

A large component of the politics of contemporary advocates of non-reformist reforms is the idea of universal reforms. Universal reforms are universal because they affect the entirety of the class. These reforms are contrasted with particularist reforms which have a much more limited range of the class that it affects. An example of a universal reform that is frequently given is Medicare for All and an example of a particularist reform would be police or prison abolition. In his response to *Jacobin* writer and Philadelphia DSA member Melissa Naschek's review of his book *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*, political theorist and editor of *Viewpoint Magazine* Asad Haider points out the flaws of this view.

> *"On the other hand, movements against any form of domination and exploitation are not automatically universal. Economic demands are not inherently any more universal than other kinds of demands; even an expansive economic demand like universal healthcare in the United States, however valuable such a reform would be, does not even begin to address capitalist exploitation on a global scale. To argue for improvements in the living conditions of Americans alone is not universal. But any struggle can become universal if it challenges the whole structure of domination and brings about a collective subject with the possibility of self-governance. What counts is how this struggle is conducted, who it resonates with, and what organizational processes it initiates or augments. All struggles emerge from specific sites and have specific demands. But they generate universal principles: that nobody should be a slave; that nobody should be exploited; that nobody should be subjected to state violence. What these principles allude to is a collectivity of people who aim to govern their own lives."* [18]

Not only does the framework of universal reforms get the question of universalism wrong, it also glosses over a very important question. Who is the struggle for the reform engaging or mobilizing? While it might seem like it would follow that universal reforms will mobilize a broad cross-section of the class on the basis of the universal nature of the reform, this is not necessarily the case. The question is more tied to how the struggle for the reform is carried out. On a very basic level, if the struggle is being carried out through standard electoralist means— by running candidates, through canvassing in order to get people to vote in a certain way or calling elected officials— it will only engage the section of the population that votes. [19] [20] This population is often more well-off, older, and whiter than the working class., In fact, most of the working class does not vote. While these methods can be tied to a "get out the vote" strategy, any strategy designed around this is still going to have to base itself in the section of the population that can be relied on to vote.

This becomes a problem when you are dealing with reforms like Medicare for All. The section of the population most affected by the deficient US healthcare system are poor and working-class people, people of color (especially women of color), disabled people, trans people, and people with any of these intersecting structures. These groups do not make-up the sections of society targeted through methods engaging people as voters or potential voters. In fact, with many laws restricting votes via voter ID laws or laws prevent formerly incarcerated people from voting, and people from the aforementioned groups are often explicitly ejected from the pool of potential voters. However, one of the main ways in which advocates of Medicare for All are being told to struggle for the reform is through canvassing so these problems have already surfaced. [21]

When the most oppressed are deprioritized, the potential effectiveness of the reform is

undermined. If people of color, people with disabilities, trans people and others are not given priority within movements for demands like universal quality health care, the problems that they face that reproduce the structures of oppression affecting them are less likely to be addressed. The treatment they receive when accessing medical care is not something that is solved by making medical care universally accessible. The problems are much deeper. Healthcare must be transformed and it cannot be transformed by solely mobilizing the most privileged sections of the working class or the liberal sections of other classes. This argument is not just applicable to health care struggles. When we engage in struggles for reforms, we have to make sure that we are mobilizing and bringing front and center the most oppressed sections of the working class.

What organizational forms is the struggle creating?

Throughout the course of any struggle, new organizations are created. In some cases, these can be ephemeral such as a strike committee or picket teams. In others, they can be lasting institutions like unions, shop floor committees, or community organizations. For any socialist strategy to be successful, we need to form lasting democratic working class institutions. These institutions are needed in order to organize militant struggles to win reforms. The expansion of militant democratic rank-and-file working-class organizations through struggles are necessary to guarantee that reforms that are won are not rolled back shortly after the initial victory as well as to push against attempts to introduce elements that would create organizational divisions, making future struggles more difficult.

Our orientation towards organizing and the creation of new organizations should not be looked at solely through the lens of efficacy. One can say that strikes are most effective in winning reforms

and that democratic rank-and-file workers' organizations are necessary for this. However, there is a danger present in this statement. We run the risk of looking at working-class activity and organizations from a purely instrumentalist view. We become only concerned with working-class action through its usefulness in advancing our goals. This is particularly clear in certain Democratic road strategies where unions and strikes are seen as big guns that the party brings out to combat capital strikes and other forms of resistance to the leftist government.

We do not just want to effectively win reforms— we want to transform society. This goal is what needs to be present in our minds as we approach the question of what organizational forms the struggle is creating. From an instrumentalist view, rank-and-file unions could be necessary to win Medicare for All, especially one closer to the ideal form of the legislation. However, even in its more ideal form, the resulting system will be, to some degree, bureaucratic and alienating for the patients and community it serves as is the case with the national healthcare systems in the United Kingdom and Sweden. Rank-and-file nurses' unions might help fight against those worst aspects but this is not sufficient. If, over the course of the struggle for Medicare for All, organizations that bring nurses and patients and the surrounding community together hold the potential for future organizations that could work to transform health care. The task of revolutionaries becomes building up and strengthening those organizations.

In this way, we begin to see the real connection between our practical everyday struggles and our revolutionary goals. Reform struggles become less about reforms that, if free of serious compromises, will destabilize capitalism but about the ability for the struggle to lay the organizational groundwork for the future transformation of society. This also frees us from the dilemma posed by advocates of the Democratic road as our strategy becomes less focused on the expansion

of the state by way of social welfare or nationalization but instead on building the potential for transformation of those industries and sectors of society. This is especially valuable in the case of reforms like Medicare for All which do not seek nationalization of the healthcare industry nor is likely to produce such. Our orientations are not dependent on reforms and our vision of the transition to socialism does not depend on them being formally incorporated into the state.

This also allows us to grapple with working class self-rule. Through the course of struggle, workers' organizations produce not just potential basis for transformation of the industries in question but also raise the question of working class self-rule. In fact, the question of working class self rule is at the heart of the question of transformation of those industries and society. It is not just simply a matter of creating better, less alienating institutions or building strong unions that can be better at checking the power of capital, but new institutions that create a new society.

Is this struggle putting pressure on fault lines in the State?

For socialists who seek to smash the state, reforms present a real danger. Rather than providing more space and freedom for the working class and left, reforms can in turn strengthen the state and lead to a weakening of the left. Reforms can provide the state with new means to control working class activity. In *Poor People's Movement: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*, authors Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward highlight how this dynamic ended up working between unemployed councils and relief reform during the Great Depression:

> *"While the leaders of the unemployed groups had been concentrating on forming a national organization complete with a constitution and a bureaucratic structure,*

> *the local groups across the country were declining. They were declining largely as a result of the Roosevelt Administration's more liberal relief machinery, which diverted local groups from disruptive tactics and absorbed local leaders in bureaucratic roles. And once the movement weakened, and the instability of which it was one expression subsided, relief was cut back. That this happened speaks mainly to the resiliency of the American political system. That it happened so quickly, however, and at so cheap a price, speaks to the role played by leaders of the unemployed themselves. For by seeking to achieve more substantial reform through organization and electoral pressure, they forfeited local disruptions and became, however inadvertently, collaborators in the process that emasculated the movement."* [22]

> *"In some places, relief administrators went so far as to induct leaders of the unemployed into the relief bureaucracy on the grounds that "a Organized client groups meet a need," and that "some process should be developed to make group 'vocalization' possible. Fair hearings and similar procedures in client group representation at advisory committee meetings should prove to be effective in relation to special situations"* [23]

Similarly, reforms which can provide legal protections for worker organizing can be a double-edged sword. The Wagner Act established such protections but in the process, established the National Labor Relations Board, heavily regulating the existence and formation of unions and enshrining business unionism. If our goal is to build working class power, then we must keep in mind our relationship with the capitalist state. It is not enough to win reforms, but socialist activity has to be disruptive to the state or at the very least, we must not strengthen it.

Fortunately, the state is not a monolithic body. Within it are different fractions of the ruling class with different goals and political visions. These different fractions can produce fault lines that make it difficult for the state to function properly. A clear example of this recently is the government shutdown of 2018-2019. These tensions shouldn't be seen as abstracted away from class struggle. Class struggle produces and puts added pressure on these fault lines. The 2011 protests against anti-union and austerity measures in Wisconsin provides a clear case of class struggles producing and heightening. The large protests by state employees under attack eventually lead to fourteen members of the State Senate fleeing the state in order to prevent quorum.[24] As the protests grew, employees of the fire department, one of the sections of government employees not affected by the legislation, joined the protests.[25] While eventually the state senators returned and the movement stalled after a failed recall attempt, it shows the potential for working class struggle to deepen conflict within the state. The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) demonstrates this potential as well. In response to the wave of protests after the Eric Garner and Michael Brown murders at the hands of police, the New York Police Department went on a slow-down. While officially stated as safety measures as a result of the deaths of two police officers in a shooting,[26] the slow-down was a clear counter-protest against M4BL and the weak reforms NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio sought to enact. For a brief moment, M4BL helped weaken the functioning of the particularly brutal, repressive institutions of the state.

While all of these moments were short-lived, they show what is possible. If we seek to smash the state, then we must keep in mind the ways we can put pressure on the fault lines of the state. Reforms can strengthen the state and, in the long run, weaken class struggle. If with each struggle we put increasing stress on the state, increase the degree of internal conflict, and weaken its ability to respond in a united fashion, we can limit the possibility of this happening. This also means we must keep in mind how the state might try to regroup and reassert itself. Keeping these dynamics in mind not only can help us in the long run but brings the question of smashing the state from being a hypothetical for a future movement, making it a relevant strategic question in struggles right now.

Looking Forward

Not every reform struggle will provide satisfactory answers for each question. How they stack up depends a lot on the balance of forces of the moment and our capacities. Nevertheless, what it allows us is the opportunity to evaluate our practices and past engagements to map out new strategies and tactics as the terrain of class struggle changes. We can think about our engagement with reforms in a strategic manner like how advocates of non-reformist reforms try to do without falling into a rigid vision of unbroken chains of reforms or instrumentalist vision of class struggle. It provides us with road signs to help us navigate reform struggles and lets us avoid pitfalls of producing overly rigid models for revolutionary practice.

To return to Horras, we should not make reforms to be something they are not. While reforms might not have any inherent non-reformist content of their own, the struggle for them however can. It is our task as revolutionaries that we connect those struggles to revolution. ■

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The Rank and File Strategy on New Terrain

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Preliminaries: Moody On Moody

Seventeen years after the release of Kim Moody's pamphlet The Rank and File Strategy[1] for the socialist organization Solidarity, and two decades after Moody's then prescient assessment of the state of the working class, Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy, his recent offering On New Terrain: How Capital is Reshaping the Battlefield of the Class War comes at a crucial moment both for the socialist movement in the United States and for the growing influence within it of Moody's ideas. The book expands on most of his key insights, offers some crucial correctives to his earlier work, and once again establishes Moody's place as one of the most preeminent analysts of the composition of labor markets and labor process in the Anglophone left.

Here, I would offer that both a social reproduction theory (SRT) framework and deeper attention to the question of socialist organization can offer some insight into some of the most crucial tasks for a rank and file perspective today. In particular, a SRT framework helps us think concretely about the relationship between "consciousness" and "organization" raised in the original pamphlet, while signaling the aspects that are most urgent for us today.

The Rank and File Strategy

The two movements—the refinement of Moody's ideas, and the manner in which they are currently being taken up by a much more substantial slice of the socialist left—are often at odds. For this reason, it is necessary to take a moment to re-read The Rank and File Strategy in light of On New Terrain, as well as in the context of the developing practice of today's new wave of rank and filers located today not in Solidarity or in its predecessor organization, the International Socialists (IS), but in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), where it was recently adopted at their national convention in Atlanta. Once a moribund organization, the DSA has seen their membership explode and their political composition expand to encompass a fairly heterogeneous array of tendencies of socialist thought, including a number of experienced socialists, as well as a massive cohort of new and quite politically fluid young socialists.

The rank and file strategy is still often practically posed as a document advocating for a version of "class suicide" that is articulated as a political strategy aimed at discerning the most effective targets for a small group of socialists hoping to make a large political impact.

Though bigger, this layer, as with previous waves of rank and filers, is drawn largely from college educated and disproportionately downwardly mobile presumptively professional socialists, part of a radicalization that began with Occupy, among those increasingly aware of the diminished prospects for stable professional careers. For this reason, the rank and file strategy is still often practically posed as a document advocating for a version of "class suicide" that is articulated as a political strategy aimed at discerning the most effective targets for a small group of socialists hoping to make a large political impact. It is also seen as a viable personal strategy for building a life as a socialist that might avoid the isolation of academia, of paid organizer tracks for unions and NGOs, and the longstanding danger that youthful radicalism might give way to the conservatizing influences of traditional professional careers or the pressures of small business ownership.

As a pamphlet, The Rank and File Strategy has been a real workhorse of the socialist movement. When it was initially written, its influence was narrow but intense. It recast the legacy of IS industrialization in a form fit for its moment and swayed a small but important number of the now famously sparse "Generation X" socialists—inspired by Miners for Democracy, New Directions in the UAW, and reformers in the Steelworkers and Teamsters—to commit to taking rank and file union jobs in the hopes of organizing existing opposition caucuses and member-to-member networks. Their influence has taken shape, since then, in logistics (IBT), in transit (TWU), in longshore (ILA and ILWU), in rail, in auto (the UAW, unexpectedly, as a major player in academic unionization), and somewhat incidentally, in the unions representing teachers (AFT and NEA), nurses (NNU and NYSNA), hotels (UNITE-HERE), and more generally, unions including Communication Workers of American (CWA) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Many of them also took the tack of contributing to "transitional organizations" like Labor Notes or to caucuses, reform locals won through caucus struggles and elections, or by joining the staff of left-led participatory unions, particularly the CWA.

The Rank and File Strategy lays out the "the problem" quite convincingly, as a historically generated separation between the socialist left and the working class, as both a result and a determinant of the historic weakness of working-class institutions in the United States. A related problem in this text is the lack of a "sea" of class conscious workers in which socialists can "swim," and thus "do" socialism. Consequently, the task was to help the tidal waves of local class activity converge into one common sea, at first in the form of a "militant minority" in and through "transitional organizations." The latter included caucuses like Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), cross-union and cross-sectoral organizing, publication and education efforts such as Labor Notes, as well as formations that might promote "social movement unionism" like Jobs With Justice, organized through Central Labor Councils and under the auspices of "left"-led international unions and locals.

It must be pointed out that The Rank and File Strategy did not assert—in fact explicitly denied—that the workplace is the only or the most important source of workers' consciousness, and it was this recognition that drove its vision of "social movement unionism."

This was conceived as both reform locals lead by democratic insurgent caucuses, but also, in practice, the left-talking but internally undemocratic and highly top-down "bureaucratically militant" section of the organized labor movement, which would eventually split with the AFL-CIO union federation on the basis of a shared staff-driven organizing model, Change To Win[2]. This practice at the time reflected a deviation from Moody's opposition to militants accepting staff jobs at top-down

unions, but it was nevertheless common as a form of engagement with social movement unionism. While the two strategies were elaborated as diametrically opposed, organizations and groups of socialists didn't always find them to be mutually exclusive in their practice.

Part of the explicit goal of these transitional organizations was to develop and cohere a minority of unionists who are not only tactically militant but armed with a more comprehensive politics. Transitional organizations build concrete solidarity across unions and industries but also across the segregations of race, nation, gender, sexuality, as well as other divisions within the working class that are expressed as sectoral divides and reinforced by chauvinist policies, attitudes and harassment at the hands of the boss.

As critics have often noted, there was a stagist idea of how to radicalize the proletarians at work here. It was, after all, a strategy rooted in the most organized and often most militant sectors (such as logistics and manufacturing), that have the greatest direct power to disrupt profit through workplace strikes. At the same time, these sectors can be among the more socially conservative sections of the class in terms of receptiveness to hierarchies of nationality, gender, and race. Rather than viewing the working class as always already radicalized and for-itself, merely held back or restrained by false or conservative leadership, the rank and file strategy assumes that the development of consciousness—from trade-union to class, and perhaps from class consciousness to a revolutionary commitment—is the project of organized socialists built through concrete solidarity within overlapping layers of organization.

With this horizon in mind, The Rank and File Strategy laid out why the minority and then-shrinking sector of the already unionized workforce is a crucial arena for socialist intervention on both practical and political grounds. Many of these

arguments remain quite convincing to young socialists seeking to commit themselves to a life of organizing and wishing to sustain themselves as an activist and militant without working on the basis of charitable grants or government funding. It is particularly convincing for those who might wish to organize from and toward their own truly held beliefs rather than primarily as a paid staffer beholden to the agenda of their employer, whether union, NGO, or government service provider. The pamphlet was especially sharp on the question of the necessity of workplace action to the achievement of even basic reforms, let alone the advancement toward or achievement of socialism. In the context of the community-heavy and particularistic 1990s that inspired it, it was rarely made and a crucial point.

It must be pointed out that The Rank and File Strategy did not assert—in fact explicitly denied—that the workplace is the only or the most important source of workers' consciousness, and it was this recognition that drove its vision of "social movement unionism." A lengthy section of the pamphlet rooted the weakness of the U.S. workers' movement precisely in the history of African slavery and indigenous genocide in building a working class historically divided against itself and often more mobilized in an explicitly political way around its own internal divisions than against capital. The piece saves space for a special interlude on the role of union bureaucracy as a repository of some of the most backward historical forms of workers' consciousness, as a brake on militancy in moments of upsurge or even simply of militant fightback, and as an engine of anti-communism, meant broadly as the purging of all leftists and radicals from the labor movement. It attempted to synthesize both a non-sectarian assertion of the crucial role of socialists in potentiating, if not activating, rank and file rebellion when the conditions become ripe, and elucidated a compelling set of historical examples that underlie both the urgency of this and some

of the recurring obstacles to the full development of a conscious and active class-for-itself: not only rearguard action by the bureaucracy, anti-communism, racism, and other kinds of chauvinism, but also sectarianism among socialists brodaly committed to the strategy.

Moody also briefly mentions some of the limits of the original piece that have become much more salient. He calls these "the missing tasks," asking if there is a "particularly socialist way to approach union and workplace organizing." It makes sense that this was less of a focus in the original document, as the socialist movement was then particularly weak. Now, with the growth of the DSA to more than 60,000 new members, the question of the role of socialist organization and the role of the rank and file orientation within broader socialist strategy is much more urgent. The question today is also what it means to be not only a socialist rank and filer, but a rank and filer who is part of a large socialist organization and of a growing socialist movement. Unfortunately, Moody raises this question in Jacobin[3], but doesn't answer it there, instead turning to the welcome but well worn idea that socialist unionists should build militant minorities and fight for worker control in their unions, and build militant minority unions where unions don't already exist. The next installments of this essay will take up these "missing tasks," the militant minority, and the end game of the rank and file strategy.

On Social Reproduction

Writing for Jacobin[4], Kim Moody reflects on the rank and file strategy[5], focusing in part on the trajectory (and really, the failure) of the top-down, change-to-win model. This, of course, was the primary strategic alternative to the rank-and-file strategy following the period in which the original pamphlet was written[6]. There is little on that balance sheet with which to disagree, and indeed, Moody's assertion is that even in a period of low

class struggle, tight bureaucratic control over a "mobilization" model produces a more or less steady stream of localized rank-and-file rebellions.

Moody's reassessment, and his development of modern conditions in On New Terrain, also takes this observation somewhat more overtly in the direction of explicitly socialist organizing than anything that appeared in his original strategic perspective. In it, he begins to outline how socialist workplace organizing today must respond to new conditions and tasks at the level of transitional and socialist organization. Moody's original formulation suggests that rank-and-file movements must align themselves with "community" organizations, including worker centers and environmental organizations, and that this alliance is crucial because social movements are, like unions, training grounds for working-class and socialist organizers. In such struggles, working class organizers confront problems that are infrequently taken up by rank-and-file caucuses, or by unions more broadly: from state violence and gentrification to the destruction of the basic conditions of life, in terms of clean air, water, and habitable weather conditions in the name of profit.

It is notable that Moody approvingly mentions Giovanni Arrighi—with whom he has frequently been counterposed—and his insights about the dual nature and special vulnerabilities of capital's intensive modes of accumulation in this reassessment. Here, it is also worthwhile to mention Beverly Silver and her work in the same methodological and ideological vein in Forces of Labor, in particular her focus on the importance of public sector workers in the realm of social reproduction in "kicking off" new waves of struggle over the last century. Explicating Arrighi, she notes that conditions of austerity in the public sector create disruption of older forms of security and solidarity.

This is borne out in Moody's take in Terrain where he, too, emphasizes the importance of

worker struggle in the public sector and among care workers, though neither he, nor she, makes explicit the reasons that social reproduction theorists suggest for explaining these developments, beyond a broad strokes understanding that they represent a reaction to austerity. Silver offers a useful quantitative account of the frequency and timeline of strikes in the social reproductive sector, but her focus is not on their political qualities. Moody, meanwhile, attends to the way changes in the composition of the workforce (including its increasing racial, national, and gender diversity and feminization across sectors) have potentiated action in these sectors, while also intensifying the potential for disruption and working-class power at nodes of circulation—"choke points" of distribution. Taken together, these insights point to a second sort of choke point: choke points of social reproduction in the realm of paid care.

Much of the work of social reproduction theory, especially its ethnographic and journalistic engagements, points out how workers in these sectors may be first activated by the experience of their tasks, which engage the basic needs and ability of the working class as a whole to reproduce itself. This can spark not only early and militant action (as we've seen in the waves of teachers' and nurses' struggles, and later in the hospitality sector), but also produce a collective consciousness that takes up not only bread-and-butter demands for wages and benefits, but class-wide demands for services in education and healthcare. Often, these struggles are articulated as not just about the increasing pressures of work due to deskilling and downward wage pressure, but also as being about the general capitalist assault on the conditions of learning, health, and basic survival for broad sections of the working class, who are also these workers' students, patients, family, and community members. Moody has, in the process of engaging current debates about the rank and file since the publication of On New Terrain, explicitly taken up this point[7].

The equally necessary (but on its own insufficient) role of workers at choke points of social reproduction is undertheorized. In particular, their role in raising class-wide demands and consciousness of the working class as such, with shared interests, is just as indispensable to a fully worked-out, socialist rank-and-file strategy.

What, then, is the relationship between both kinds of "choke point" and the questions of organization and consciousness articulated in the rank-and-file strategy? And how do we think about adapting these to the current moment? It goes without saying that Moody's attention to choke points of distribution as well as production is central to building a workers' movement with the power to hit capital where it hurts—in profit-making—and to do so directly and strategically. On a structural level, this is simply a site of workers' power that cannot be dispensed with.

The equally necessary (but on its own insufficient) role of workers at choke points of social reproduction is undertheorized. In particular, their role in raising class-wide demands and consciousness of the working class as such, is just as indispensable to a fully worked-out, socialist, rank-and-file strategy. The argument here is that this specific form of consciousness arises out of the labor process of paid social reproductive work and also out of the social position of the workers engaged in it. Put another way, it arises out of the conditions of both paid and unpaid social reproductive labor, and in each case, out of a crisis of social reproduction, a crisis of care. The increasing desperation of most workers and their family and social networks to successfully reproduce themselves both in terms of bare life, but also as workers capable of abstractable labor-power.

In the course of conducting research in South Africa, I found that striking nurses frequently made this clear in their comments, explaining that their demands for increased staffing

reflected both the pressures on them as workers caring for overloaded wards, and their concern for their own patients, but also their worries about the care available to themselves and members of their own families, which usually included elderly and HIV-affected adults often acutely in need health services.

In the United States, the same sentiment was articulated by striking teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, and California on a personal level[8]. Rare was the public school teacher who could afford to educate their children privately. Teachers, from the beginning of the strike, made it plain that they were fighting for their own wages and those of all public sector workers in the state, and for their own students, but also for their children as students and for their retired parents, and the un- or underemployed members of their extended families who depended on schools, on the state employee's health care fund, and, at times, directly on the regular if minimal salaries of those same teachers. These networks not only reflected the distribution of care work and collective dependence on the wages of individual workers, but were pathways for collective memories of past strikes and militancy where nurses often had nurses as parents or teachers, teachers, who had also been on strike. These workers also remembered the changes in work, salary, and benefits over time.

The significance and potential of social reproduction choke points is increasingly obvious in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic and a historic uprising for Black liberation and against state violence, as social reproduction workers shut down sites of transmission and risk their own lives to treat the sick, while at the same time logistics workers strike for safe workplaces, for Black Lives, and to demonstrate their social necessity beyond the logic of profit.

The inclusion of social reproduction choke points into a strategic analysis of rank-and-file organizing expands the list of sectors and workplaces that might be targets for rank-and-file organizing and helps to flesh out the relationship between rank-and-file organizing and broader social movements. This revision might also be understood to introduce new relevant forms of transitional organization, as it complicates the original map of worker consciousness as implied in The Rank and File Strategy. If one of socialists' tasks is to develop broader and deeper consciousness among workers, it makes sense to attend to the arenas where that consciousness is already developing, based on the social, political, and productive roles particular workers may occupy.

To elaborate this, it helps to think about "social movements" in much the way the rank-and-file strategy frames workplace struggle: not as a parallel comparisons, but as overlapping and concurrent with its strategic understanding of the particular role of unionized workers, and those working in the realms of production and circulation of commodities.

If the rank-and-file strategy already allows that consciousness also develops outside the workplace, and social reproduction analysis demonstrates the ways in which that consciousness can be among the first sparks for waves of workplace struggle and rank-and-file rebellion, this seems like an urgent area for the further development of the rank-and-file idea.

Such transitional formations could—as the civil rights and anti-war, feminist and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 70s once did—help coalesce a militant layer of radical, militant, and even revolutionary workers.

Even as initially articulated, the rank-and-file strategy allows that working class leadership and militancy emerges not only from workplace struggle, not only in workers' centers and the environmentalist movement, but in the broad

social fights against sexism, against racism, and against oppression of trans and queer people. These movements, in periods of low struggle, have often been represented and dominated by (or even conflated with) NGO bureaucrats and the most privileged sections of those affected by oppression. But when social movement activity increases, organized working class elements within these movements are inevitably aware of this limitation and begin to contest for power with bureaucrats and reformist leaders. In moments of upsurge and uprising, these intra-movement conflicts intensify; to assume the inevitable defeat of rank-and-file protestors or rioters at the hands of the peace police or established reformist organizations is no more reasonable (or politically satisfactory) than assuming that the rebellions of union members will always lose out to entrenched leadership, even when that is most often the case.

Just as we have seen the rebirth of an organized socialist movement grow out of the financial crisis of 2008, and a radicalization develop from a politics of the 99% to more explicit working-class concerns, we have also seen a class-oriented radicalization amidst a wave of global feminist struggle and the struggle for Black liberation, as well as, in fits and starts, in the movement for the defense and rights of immigrants. Meanwhile, queer workers have led spurts of new union organizing in retail, in New York City, but also in Virginia and Washington, often against employers who market themselves as liberal, Democratic Party-identified, and gay/queer friendly. Such workers led a massive march in 2019 called "Reclaim Pride" against corporate Pride, and explicitly in support of Black Lives, Sex worker rights, trans rights, immigrant rights, and Palestinian liberation, and against police presence at the event and in LGBTQ communities. This year, Reclaim Pride reformed under the same banner holding a massive protest for Black Queer Liberation.

In the feminist wave of #MeToo and the Women's March, we've seen precisely that same radical agenda asserted against the still-largely NGO and Democratic Party leadership, and seen it win. In the run-up to the Women's March of 2017, the then-largest single-day demonstration in the history of the United States, and certainly since the mass demonstrations against the second invasion of Iraq, women commentators in Facebook groups, and "members" of NGOs like the National Organization of Women (NOW) and Planned Parenthood pushed against initial organizing led by an all white and cis organizing committee. They asserted instead a bottom-up program of representation in terms of both personnel and platform of trans women, queer people, sex workers, immigrants, Black and Latinx women and queer people, and Palestinian women's rights.

The International Women's Strike took up this agenda and framed it in class terms, calling for a strike on March 8, 2017—International Women's Day—in line with calls internationally for mass women's strikes in Argentina, Poland, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe and Latin America. The call had to be taken up by the reluctant organizers of the Democratic Party-led Womens' March, who until then had planned a rally for the release of Trump's Tax Returns as the "next step" for the movement. The day resulted in the closure of three school districts in "red" states, anticipating the deep well of dissatisfaction among teachers and the mechanism of forcing district closure that later became the multi-state walk out of Red for Ed.

In a similar expression of class tensions and consciousness, in the early explosions of the Movement for Black Lives, we saw increasing conflict between the self-appointed leadership of the movement oriented toward NGO career advancement and Democratic Party politics, and class-conscious local organizers who criticized the consolidation of the movement on those grounds.

These organizational dynamics echo the spontaneous ejection of long-time but compromised "leaders" of the Black struggle, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, from mass meetings and demonstrations during the intense wave of demonstrations following the police murder of Mike Brown. #MeToo has sparked a wave of workplace action and strikes against sexual harassment in hotels and food service, entertainment and education, but also in the largely non-union auto sector in the South[8].

Since then, of course, the historically large mass of four million Women's March protesters has been utterly dwarfed by an estimated thirty million people participating in the George Floyd Rebellion and the ongoing uprising. The relative size and power of this class-quake has produced comparably large rifts and openings in the same vein as its precursors. In a few short months, a range of immediate reforms have gone from pipe-dream to promise, and labor demands like the removal of police from school grounds or from the AFL-CIO as a whole are suddenly making piecemeal headway and have moved from niche, to normalized well beyond the radical left.

Longstanding institutions long taken for granted as the representatives of Black politics—even the more recently constituted NGO/Democratic Party formation which trademarked Movement for Black Lives in the years since Ferguson—moved well behind the pace of the increasing radicalism of movement demands. Where once body cameras and 25% reductions in police budgets seemed to mark the left edge of a reformist agenda, now, calls for full defunding, disbanding, and disarmament are standard. Even anti-capitalist calls for full "abolition"of the police (recalling the multiple and mutually-implied calls for "abolition" in the Communist Manifesto[9]) are routinely discussed not only in far left reading circles and coalition meetings, but in the mainstream press. Predictably, this radicalism has been met

with backlash—from the far right and the Trump administration and from state and local governments, but also from liberal NGOs taking up the task of reigning in radical ambitions and militant activities. The ultimate outcome of those contests remains to be seen.

In thinking about these tensions through a social reproduction frame, the original conception of "social movement unionism" in rank-and-filism requires some revision. Instead of organizing the relationship between the union rank-and-file, and working class organization and tendencies within social movements in and through layers of bureaucracy in central labor councils and NGO coalitions, it seems increasingly possible and consistent with the strategy's emphasis on working class leadership to connect the ranks of unions with the more class conscious and independent layers of social movements directly. To that end, projects similar to the International Women's Strike, or the recently activated Peoples' Strike[10], could potentially serve as an additional form of "transitional organization." Such formations serve as both a coalition space and a left pole, attracting unorganized and radicalizing individuals, while open to participation by socialist organizations, union caucuses, worker centers, coops, tenants unions, feminst, queer, trans, immigrant and other collectives.

Such transitional formations could—as the civil rights and anti-war, Women's Liberation and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 70s once did—help coalesce a militant layer of radical, militant, and even revolutionary workers who can not only build the power of organized workers toward class demands (including those generated through social movement upsurge), but cohere newly activated sections of the working class in independent organizations that can weather and prepare for the inherently inconsistent and unpredictable lulls and upticks in spontaneous social rebellion. Transitional formations can

create continuity during lulls in social movement activity and engage in political education within the organized workers' movement, framing the questions not, as they are in bourgeois politics, as "divisive" culture-war tempests, but as practical matters of the everyday life of coworkers, family, and community members. The can also support and sustain shop floor, tenant, and other formations acting as a political center across sectors and arenas of struggle.

Imagine, for instance, if after the murder of Teamster member and beloved school service worker Philando Castile, a front of workers and worker organizations had been better able to raise his murder within the organized labor movement, not just as an abstract matter of racial justice but as an attack on a union sibling, in the way that Teamsters did when, more recently, Frank Oronez was killed by police while on the job as a UPS driver[11]. Imagine if now, in a new period of increasing radicalization and politicization, socialists were organized to take up the next iteration of something like the struggle of the Charleston[5], that could not only be turned to reform efforts within the ILA but toward radicalization of the Black movement along class lines and radicalization of the labor movement along anti-racist ones[12]. Conditions today clearly favor these possibilities more than they did two decades ago, and we need a rank-and-file and a socialist strategy primed to take them up now and whenever critical moments for doing so occur.

To a significant degree, this kind of social reproduction rank-and-fileism, rooted in explicitly working class formations, is increasingly possible and underway, building on the longer efforts of rank-and-file unionists and socialists who committed some (sometimes many) years ago to a vision of building working class power from below. The new popularity and expression of rank-and-file strategies among the layers of socialists radicalized more recently are also playing a crucial

role, particularly among the nurses on the frontlines of the pandemic, among teachers pushing for schools safe from police and pathogens, and in both union and non-union workplaces deemed essential (in retail, logistics, and sanitation).

In the absence of coherent or effective public health policy, and in the heat of mass struggle, the logic of worker's control has even (occasionally, very temporarily) emerged as a practical possibility or necessity—from workers strikes demanding changes in production toward socially necessary goods (ventilators and other scarce medical equipment), to cross-sector mutual aid delivering Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to where it was most needed, to health care workers' demands for industry rationalization and nationalization, to transit workers starting and stopping buses and trains on the basis of clear goals: resist police and aid protesters. In these moments, glimmers of the socialist vision and method that animates the rank-and-file strategy appear where they once seemed unlikely-to-impossible.

But what is (and what has been) actually or explicitly socialist about the rank and file strategy, in both its earlier form and in more recent years? Moody is exactly right to raise this question now even as it was largely glossed over in his first rendition of the strategy. Given a few years of renewal in a growing socialist movement, and a few months of crisis and collective action, the question of how to get from shop-floor struggle to a new society suddenly seems like something more than a thought exercise or a deeply held wish. At the same time, we have much more recent experience to observe for the purpose of understanding how the rank-and-file strategy has played out in the context of a growing, organized, socialist movement.

The final part of this essay (part 3) will grapple with the practice and potential of the actually-existing 21st century rank-and-file strategy, and

how it has shaped the way socialists as a whole have been able to engage and intervene in the current moment of profound crisis and urgent possibility.

Socialists and the Rank and File Strategy

Socialists today face a set of conditions that is, at once, very like those which socialists faced when The Rank and File Strategy was published, while in other ways, the political economic terrain we operate in is utterly transformed. The working class is still facing a profound crisis of organization; the labor movement continues to shrink, and is largely on the defensive despite a number of hopeful signs of new militancy, increasing success and frequency of strike action. On the other hand, the working class is increasingly politicized, and the socialist movement, while still small, has grown from numbers in the single digits of thousands at its low point in the 2000s to, now, tens of thousands of card-carrying members.

One condition that is mentioned but not strategically taken up in Moody's new book is the degree to which Bernie Sanders' presidential run reflected and expanded a new reality of "open" declarations of socialism following the long political half-life of McCarthyism in the United States. The Rank and File Strategy was largely silent on the question of whether socialists should organize openly as such, but it certainly did not require them to do it.

Practically, until very recently, Moody's comrades and acolytes largely did not organize as open socialists, despite the intentions of many to do so. In the new iteration of the strategy in the DSA, however, in part because the surge of interest in the DSA and rank and file organizing followed Bernie, it is impossible to keep socialist commitments under wraps. The DSA's role in helping to foment the initial teachers' strike in West Virginia is well and publicly known[13], if contentious[14],

mentioned and discussed openly both in the press and in the rotunda of the statehouse where teachers gathered during the strike. It was more recently mobilized to argue that the pathway to more strikes and rank and file power is through a strategic engagement with the Democratic Party and full tilt left and labor commitment to the 2020 Bernie campaign.

What then is the role of socialist organizations and socialist politics in the rank and file strategy and vice versa? When the original document was written, the hope was for a regroupment of socialist forces within a single organization, and the implied but not specified trajectory of the rank and file transformation of the labor movement was toward a break of the labor movement with the Democratic Party. While the relationship between the two wasn't spelled out, criticism of left and working class subjection to the Democratic Party as a capitalist party is a strategic orientation Moody has elaborated in print nearly as often as he has pressed for rank and fileism.

In fact, Moody's exposition of the scope and nature of Democratic Party formation and rule is among the clearest and most explicit we have. Moody expands on these ideas in On New Terrain and in some specific articles on this topic in New Politics[15], where he argues that the Democratic Party, far from a "hollow institution" ready for takeover, is one arranged with centers of power far out of reach of ordinary members and with both formal rules and funding structures designed deliberately to undermine the power of the mass of working-class people who make up its base.

I think it is worthwhile to expand on Moody's assessment of the Democratic Party, in a way that enhances his challenge to left electoral strategies inside the Democratic Party both those that propose tactical use of ballot lines[16] (like Ackerman)[17] and those which openly reprise Harrington's realignment approach[18]. To think it through, we

have to consider the Democratic Party not merely as a party, but as a broader apparatus that holds sway well beyond the ballot box. This requires consideration not just of the fact that historically the party and the tendency to collapse protest and direct action movements into get-out-the-vote campaigns for Democrats have always become a "graveyard" for these movements, but also of the way these movements have been led in this direction. It requires investigation into the way in which the primacy of elections has been maintained on the left, despite the increasingly apparent lack of democratic structures not only in the Democratic Party itself but in the overall electoral system at every level—an issue that has activated radicalizing working-class people for two decades, from the transparently undemocratic events, enabled by both major parties, surrounding Bush v. Gore in 2000, to the increasingly gerrymandered scramble between the parties for permanent one-party fiefdoms in cities and states, to the ongoing disenfranchisement of a massive prison population and and to concerted assaults on the voting rights act.

This detachment of the rank and file strategy from Moody's remarkable clarity about the limits and dangers of socialist and working class capture by the Democratic Party is one that undermines the potential and immediate power of rank and file organizing.

Moody's analysis of the Democratic Party has often been rejected by rank and file strategy advocates in the DSA as either a naive simplification of the possibilities of using Democratic party ballot lines, or as a holdover of a dogmatic sectarian socialist past. Instead, I think this detachment of the rank and file strategy from Moody's remarkable clarity about the limits and dangers of socialist and working class capture by the Democratic Party is one that undermines the potential and immediate power of rank and file organizing, and that this is not merely a theoretical objection. The

4-6 year-long experiment in orienting the rank and file strategy towards Bernie Sanders Democratic (socialist!) Party insurgency has demonstrated in practice the validity of this less popular aspect of Moody's strategic vision.

The socialist regroupment envisioned in Moody's and Solidarity's iteration of the rank and file strategy has in large part taken place inside the DSA, even if it has been overshadowed by new membership and the growth of the socialist left. In this context, the question of a break with this Democratic Party and its broader apparatus, seems distant, perhaps even further today than it was when the rank and file strategy was written. At that time, the left was coming off a failed attempt at organizing a Labor Party, and about to take up building the Green Party as a left-populist alternative to the Democrats on the strength of ballot access generated through Ralph Nader's 2000 presidential run.

In the end, both experiments in "independent" working-class politics were failures, and for the same reason: the labor bureaucracy was not ready to break with the Democratic Party. In both cases, most labor leaders stuck with the Democratic Party lending their internal get-out-the- vote apparatus and their ability to mobilize members to Democrats, rather than to any third party alternative. This is because that layer continued to see its power as a consequence of favor from Democratic Party politicians and to see that favor, limited as it is, as conditional on their ability to get out the vote for Democratic politicians. This has remained a sticking point in more recent efforts to reform the Democratic Party from within, either by takeover or by realignment—in a latest example, despite teachers being the job category most supportive of Bernie Sanders candidacy, and despite the weight of powerful socialist-led reform locals in Chicago and LA, the AFT ultimately endorsed Joe Biden in the primary. It was more or less a forgone conclusion that this would be the case.

The Green Party particularly exemplifies the weakness of left populism that lacks a clear class politics or socialist character, and any meaningful base in the working class, where its political muddle and declining support have mutually contributed to a downward spiral since the height of the Nader campaign. Once a home to a truly popular progressive slice of the electorate that viewed the Democratic Party as a barrier to its aims, it has become a petri dish of conspiracism and left-to-right reaction, pandering to a small coalition of supporters of right-wing dictators on purportedly left grounds, of "feminists" fixated on trans women as the main enemy of feminism, and of environmentalists primarily motivated by a misguided and increasingly explicit racist Malthusianism. Many more good comrades continue to participate and build the Green Party, but it is difficult to see a path toward joining the Green Party to an organized working class base that could take on these toxic elements and turn the ship around.

In the Labor Party[19], on the other hand, the failure consisted of the ultimate unwillingness of most labor bureaucrats[20] to genuinely cut the cord with Democratic Party patrons and establish an independent electoral front. This was due not only to the direct relationships long established by labor's GOTV efforts and the marked but never reliable differences between Democrats and Republicans on labor policy, but also to the Democratic Party apparatus' control and influence on NGO-ified and Democratic Party-allied social movements, organized as distinct constituencies.

 These were then the closest allies of even left-wing unions in a partially operative strategy of "social movement unionism," but one that reinforced electoral ties with the Democratic Party and a certain degree of transactional solidarity between organizations conceiving themselves as distinct minority interest groups. This was and is true of both more radical NGOs of the period, as

well as more establishment-oriented NGOs, such as the National Organization of Women (NOW), that demonstrated their willingness to back Bill Clinton despite repeated accusations of rape and sexual assault and weak Democratic Party protections for women's rights in office. As outlined in The Revolution Will Not Be Funded, a host of self-proclaimed radical NGOs ultimately toed the line set by Democratic Party aligned funders on crucial issues ranging from Palestinian liberation to criminal justice reform.

This weakness, defined and compounded by acceptance of a narrow legal remit of union bargaining and strike action, is intensified by a continued strategy of building solidarity between rank and filers and social movements through local union leaderships, CLCs, and NGOs in coalition. This structure locates the solidarity of working-class people and organizations solidly within the Democratic Party apparatus, and orients it fundamentally toward elections. This is because the Democratic Party is oriented toward elections and not toward building labor and social movements, toward politics defined and constrained by a ruling class agenda, not toward building working class power. This is coldly material in the sense that money raised for say, the Bernie Sanders campaign, can't then be reoriented toward extra-electoral efforts, and neither can internal party apparatus aimed at electing him or other left-wing Democrats—Our Revolution can't legally be repurposed toward movement building and neither can the tens of millions that working class people donated to Bernie's campaigns.

Bernie's "political revolution" wasn't able to overcome this basic structural problem—that presented by the commitments of the labor and NGO bureaucracies—that has plagued previous attempts to organize working class political independence by first and primarily focusing on the electoral realm. While Sanders supporters in fact argued for a few different strategic rationales

for the campaign as an advance toward political independence of the working class, none of these seems to have panned out or to be clearly advancing on the strategic path set out by its advocates. The recent Democratic National Convention was notable for its rigid exclusion of Bernie wing of the party, from platform and podium, with the exception of a pro-forma speech from Sanders and a more rousing, if brief and plausibly deniable dig at Biden and the powers that be, by the popular left-wing congresswoman from New York, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez.

When socialist and rank and file politics have been, for several years, at their most popular since the Great Depression, why have they, in practice, so far failed to radicalize the existing labor movement? Why have they failed to organize any front of working-class organizations prepared to take self-defense action in the face of quite extreme and urgent threats?

The argument that Bernie's campaign was a working class insurgency that could realign or replace the Democratic Party has been clearly rejected in practice by the success of the Biden campaign and its absolute refusal to incorporate, even symbolically or dishonestly, Bernie's most popular proposals for working class reforms or any elements of the campaign. Even more, the lack of coherent response by Bernie-backing socialists, let alone Sanders himself to this predictable impasse reveals the degree to which strategic engagement of socialists with the bourgeois ballot line and the strategic redeployment of shop-floor activism toward a focus on Bernie was more a series of shotgun weddings and rationalizations for alliances of opportunity than a worked out strategy.

The argument that the campaign could be a vehicle for building working class and left forces within the Democratic Party, toward a (dirty) break and a new independent party formation has also crashed and burned; if anything openings for national-level independent working class and socialist politics in terms of elections at the national level seem more narrow than ever before. There doesn't seem to be much (if any) move toward this kind of break, in part because of the long-anticipated situation of this election. This is one in which the sitting President seems to be attempting to undermine the election results at every turn, and where the only viable opposition party darkly hints at the likelihood of drawn-out contestation of poll results and electoral college challenges. This isn't fertile terrain for launching a new attempt at an independent party with little to no chance of attracting an organized base—certainly not more so than for other recent attempts. This is despite the still-increasing popularity of socialism, of major pro-working class reforms like universal health care and police reform, and the emergence of a large, militant, and sustained working-class rebellion across the country, the likes of which haven't been seen for generations.

At the same time, 2020 has presented new and quite dire threats to the working class, around the world certainly, but particularly in the USA. The Trump administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been so disastrous that the word "failure" doesn't really cover it as a descriptor; sadistic opportunism and sabotage is a more appropriate way to understand the actions of a federal government bent on escalating attacks on the working class, with special viciousness reserved for immigrants, Black people, women and queers, public sector workers, and leftists. Long-looming economic crisis converging with the pandemic has put tens of millions out of work, precipitated a mass eviction crisis, and resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of people, many of which were absolutely preventable. Democratic Party-controlled states have hardly performed much better. One hopes that with control of the White House and Congress they might have offered a more controlled Malthusianism, but in the face of such a long period of economic

activity, even these seemingly more rational managers are chomping at the back-to-work bit, even if it means the sacrifice of a few thousand more working-class people's lives.

While the virus remains untamed in much of the country, police murder and horrific immigration detention also continue apace. Vigilantes and organized fascist elements have made their presence known in the form of armed occupation of state houses, as "protesters" blocking ambulances from transporting the sick and dying to hospitals. Mass online networks are disseminating elaborate conspiracy theories, and the far right has become increasingly visible in the form of car attacks on protests and pickets–these have developed increasingly into openly fascist terror attacks by armed individuals and groups, and these in turn have increasingly engaged in public collaboration with police departments in some cities and towns.

We have, of course, seen brave (and thrilling) efforts by workers in many sectors to confront this assault through job actions. These have been sporadic and largely organized outside of the formal structures of the labor movement and those of the left. So far, these have not begun to coalesce into more sustained strike action or into any organization with the capacity to grow or to begin to match and anticipate the array and degree of threats we face. When socialist and rank and file politics have been, for several years, at their most popular since the Great Depression, why have they, in practice, so far failed to radicalize the existing labor movement? Why have they failed to organize any front of working-class organizations prepared to take self-defense action in the face of quite extreme and urgent threats?

I do hope that my posing this question this way turns out to have been a misreading of the state of working-class and socialist organization and simply premature. Teachers, clearly, continue

to be at the leading edge of organized workers' struggle for class-wide demands and self-defense, and many are agitating for and preparing strike actions to limit the threat of a viral bomb in the form of school reopenings that are now imminent or already underway across the United States. They have been joined, happily, by NBA and WNBA players striking for Black Lives of the sort that the ILWU has in some locations been threatening for several months.

But, I think, it is also the case that some of the potential of the new engagement of socialists with the shop floor and bottom-up union organizing has been limited by the degree to which that energy has been poured over several years from the DSA into elections, and thus detached from the goal of building working class-organization independent of the Democratic Party. Moody's rank and file, without his class independence, is a champion fighting with at least one hand tied behind her back.

That the regroupment of presumably non-sectarian socialist forces has taken place inside the DSA presents some specific problems for Kim Moody's rigorous critique of the Democratic Party, which are a product of the specific history of that formation, and of the way in which the primary advocates of rank and fileism have oriented themselves within it. If the new socialist bloom of DSA growth and the attendant seeding of rank and fileism is to come to different ends than the collapse of much of the socialist/communist left into the Rainbow Coalition in the late 1980s, there are some specific contradictions which will have to be directly addressed.

The strategy of building socialist politics or a party within the Democratic Party has some particular problems in addition to the ones it shares with failed attempts at independent politics. As Moody elaborates in On New Terrain, the leaders of the Democratic Party are opposed to this

and will mobilize every tool at their disposal to prevent it—indeed, they have done precisely this. Moody describes how the demands of professional politicking first and already undermine the democratic character of insurgent campaigns, the ways in which formal and informal structures of power simultaneously co-opt socialist ideas and result in a stacked system that, at increasingly high levels of power, decrease the ability of candidates who refuse the offer of capitalist funding to win.

Should they do so, the immediate pressures to perform loyalty to the party in the form of softening the line and endorsing (enemy) standard bearers come instantly into play. We've seen some of these processes up close and recently in the second campaign of Bernie Sanders for the presidency. Whereas in his first campaign, criticism of the Democratic Party was front and center, in the second attempt, he found himself having to defend himself as a "real" Democrat and heavily criticized by likely primary voters for being disloyal to the party. His speech at the recent Democratic National Convention was a lovely recitation of his most popular policy positions that I think resonated with his supporters and beyond; unfortunately it was in the service of endorsing a candidate and platform utterly and aggressively opposed to those policies.

The Democratic Party is a machine primarily concerned with elections in the realm of municipal state and national elections. The influence of the party on the labor movement, via the labor bureaucracy, doesn't end at the requirement that unions play the role of canvasser and vote-delivery apparatus for its preferred candidates. The Democratic Party and its bureaucratic labor top clients also tend to push a labor movement strategy that prioritizes elections, legalism, symbolic over direct action, and siloed concerns between labor and social movements, in a word demobilization of the working-class movement broadly.

The same can be said of the party's NGO clients and their "leaders;" just one example in this realm, recently, has been Planned Parenthood's rejection and opposition to any street-level defense of clinics, patients, and services in the face of on-the-ground right-wing mobilization aimed at intimidating patients and providers. Just as union bureaucrats oppose and limit the activation of members in favor of the legislative agenda of Democratic Party patrons, seeing their own ability to stay in well-payed power hinging on toeing that line (even in a moment of extreme dues-shrinking crises), NGOs oriented to service provision and lobbying and without even the democratic features of unions, take much the same tack, against employees, patients, and/or clients.

More generally, the role played by NGO-based self-appointed leaders in the context of this summer's Black liberation and anti-police uprising has largely been one of open attempts to pacify an angry and militant mass movement, with calls to "stay peaceful" in the face of extreme violence, and to take the power of the streets to the polls, while condemning any instigators of property destruction or even angry chants as possible instigators and infiltrators. On the rightward end of the NGO spectrum, we find calls to reconcile with the police and the assertion that the police themselves, rather than protesters in the streets or organized workers and tenants represent the real potential "change agents."

The DSA's focus on the Democratic Party, even as an opposition force within it, and on elections subjects it to much the same pressures and pull that impact the layers of labor leadership and NGO managers who have long been embroiled within that structures system of rewards and retribution, and calls for coalition across class lines. We saw this potential realized in 2016-17 in the sphere of immigration struggles when a large number of DSA locals, inspired by occupations of ICE offices in Philadelphia, Portland, and St. Louis, aimed to

replicate the strategy. Following the spontaneous occupations of airports following Trump's sudden and terrifying country bans, an initial strategy call was organized including members from chapters across the country.

DSA member and Democratic Party Women's March Organizer, Linda Sarsour was appointed by DSA staff to present a national strategy consisting entirely of a one-off march and symbolic direction action–a die-in in DC. Local chapters were left to coordinate any occupations outside of their own socialist organization. In Philadelphia, where the occupation was coordinated through a united front of socialist organizations, including a left caucus of the DSA chapter there, activists were able to raise the leftmost demand of the immigrant rights movement and ultimately win it: ending the PARS program, a specific data sharing agreement with ICE, enforcing the city's self-designation as a "sanctuary city." In Portland, a DSA chapter with a left-wing orientation similarly occupied ICE offices and won local concessions around ICE/public sector cooperation. In St. Louis, a similar occupation also succeeded in disrupting ICE operations, but not in transforming action into reform. No other DSA chapters managed to pull off any similar action. In New York, DSA members and leaders actively discouraged attempts in this direction, arguing to those assembled with intent to occupy that doing so would harm immigrants in the immediate term and would otherwise have no impact on immigration policy. Doing nothing, of course, has had exactly this unfortunate effect, and we've not seen since any effort at a coordinated strategy within DSA or the larger socialst movement to confront the ongoing terror and torutre of the USA's modern-day concentration camps, effective or otherwise. This, despite the very promising and widely supported, spontaneous mass occupations of airports in defense of immigrants in the early days of Trump's term and mass outrage at family separation and the increasingly harsh and overtly

murderous conditions in detention camps, and at the widely-exposed far-right politicization of ICE and border patrol.

Just as advocates of Ackerman's "ballot line" strategy have presented the Democratic Party as a hollow shell ripe for takeover, a point extensively disputed by Kim Moody, so have the advocates of rank and filism in the DSA presented the organization as a blank slate with little connection to its past affiliations and orientation.

A fleshed out and consistent socialist strategy focusing on building this movement as one rooted in workplace, shop-floor and direct action, and on turning periodic bursts of social movement energy to the workplace and other forms of rooted long-term working class organizing, might count among its victories many more such substantive contributions to immigrant solidarity, and pave the way for a repeat and expansion of the workers' power on display in West Virginia.

Imagine a socialist organization putting the energy and resources representing even half of those directed toward electoral work, toward a campaign building on the spontaneous solidarity by transit workers in Minneapolis, New York, and elsewhere with protestors in the early days of the George Floyd rebellions, with a goal of expanding workers' commitments to refuse transport of police and prisoners the the broader system of prison and immigration detention and control. Or a large-scale and sustained effort to propagate the logic of recent moments when workers in several disconnected plants struck or simply chose to retool and redirect production in their workplace toward the things that the working class actually needs in this moment of crisis—medical equipment and hand sanitizer. Or one building on the actions of retail and service workers who spontaneously refused service to police, or with wildcats erupting in meat and other food processing plants where immigrant workers struck for

their own and all of our safety to prevent inevitable COVID-19 outbreaks, in the face of inevitable (and actualized) retaliation by ICE agents. Imagine if that kind of campaign had the support of a robust socialist campaign against ICE that had been growing and sharpening its tactics over the course of two previous years, and that movement was able to take up the challenge of millions marching and rioting against racist anti-Black police violence.

It may well be that even our best collective efforts as an organized socialist movement wouldn't have met that challenge, but it is certain that without focused attention to strategic organizing out of spontaneous moments of bold worker and working-class action, these struggles and sparks, though growing in frequency and intensity, have died out or been doused by all manner of ill-conceived redirections from outside and inside the socialist left.

In the sphere of union and workplace organizing, the DSA's overwhelming focus on electing progressive candidates directly represents a danger for the rank and file strategy. Just as advocates of Ackerman's "ballot line" strategy have presented the Democratic Party as a hollow shell ripe for takeover, a point extensively disputed by Kim Moody, so have the advocates of rank and filism in the DSA presented the organization as a blank slate with little connection to its past affiliations and orientation. This is a similarly suspect formulation. Take as an example the historical close ties between the "old" (pre-Bernie) DSA and the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers, and in particular its conservative New York iteration, the UFT. While this connection seems to be much less influential in the "new" DSA, transformed by Bernie and by the revival of the rank and file strategy, its legacy seems to haunt the debates (and to shape the limits of debate) within the DSA.

Essays in Jacobin and Catalyst by elected DSA leaders and closely associated intellectuals (Touré Reed, Cedric Johnson, and Adolph Reed, for example), as well as in The Call[21], a blog operated as the voice of the rank and file strategy within DSA, have heralded Bayard Rustin as a kind of democratic socialist exemplar. Rustin was a close associate of Albert Shanker, the former President of the UFT and representative of a narrow right-wing and top-down political strategy both within and outside the union, and not, as far as we have any evidence, a partisan of rank and file democracy either in unions or in the social movements where he built his reputation as an organizer and activist[22].

For queers, the example is particularly poignant. Rustin was forced to live his life as an activist largely in the closet and often under threat or reality of being outed, expelled, humiliated, and exiled on the basis of his sexuality as a gay man. Compounding a political picture opposed to the possibilities of a rank and file strategy, particularly one that might be committed to explicit and organized anti-racism, feminism, and pro-queer politics, the specific contribution of Rustin's that was highlighted both in Jacobin and The Call was his taking up of color-blind social democratic reforms (explicitly compared to the Erfurt Program) as the legacy of the civil rights movement. In this discussion, this was counterposed to a politics which "does both" the work of broad demands and that of the self-organization of working-class people within the movements for Black people's, immigrants', womens', and queer lives.

Here, I think, it is crucial to point to the difference between viewing the latter as a moral rather than a strategic injunction, and to point out that the tendency to imagine that these politics might be an automatic consequence or effect of broad-based reform. Moody himself takes on this very issue when he refutes this mistaken nostalgia for Rustin and the historical misreading of Rustin's career that that nostalgia entails[23].

Since then, the association between the rank and file strategy and a politics openly hostile to anti-racist, feminist, queer, immigrant or other so-called "particular" demands seems, happily, to have waned. Nevertheless, the debate itself remains alive in the DSA, or at least on its outermost and most public edges—and in fact, it is being mainstreamed. Adolph Reed's condemnations of DSA's Afrosocialist Caucus as an example of "cancel culture" found their way into the New York Times[24]. This echoed, even if unintentionally, the framework and slogans characteristic of the intensifying McCarthyite obsessions of Trump[25] and street-level fascists with so-called "cancel culture."

It is certainly the case that Reed isn't any more accountable to DSA members than most of the other celebrities of the new socialist and social democratic moment. (He is apparently not a member of any DSA chapter, despite his influence in internal debates and his public-facing media profile.) And it seems clear that most members of DSA don't share Reed's fixation on rooting out "identity politics," even as a layer of socialist media figures rally around him on precisely this point, amplifying his oft-repeated objections to any organizing by or for oppressed groups as such, and boiling them down into crass and reactionary slogans or ironic and jaded social media postures of contrarian snark.

Even while most DSA members and many of its leaders actively oppose these kinds of oppositions between race and class (or any so-called "fringe issue" and class), it's hard not to see the hauntology of DSA's aggressively anti-communist, anti-Marxist past in the stubbornness and tenacity with which this conflict continuously re-emerges in the form of intra-socialist conflict rather than as slander by external enemies. It appears to forget the long shadow of similar kinds of McCarthyist, anti-anti-racism in the AFL-CIO during the mid-20th century.

Then, the specter of labor radicalism, Black liberation, and Marxism became the major justification for purging the formal labor movement of any and all leftists or rank and file organizers who posed real or simply potential internal political competition to an increasingly conservative bureaucratic leadership—even where some of the organizers thrown under the bus of anti-communism were the very individuals who had trained, organized, and campaigned for the labor officials who directly turned on them. Sometimes these organizers were even accused of being Stalinist operatives when they were open critics of his regime.

But none of that is to say that the most immediate danger for rank and file organizers or revolutionaries comes from inside the house (of socialism). On the contrary, the main impact of frequent confrontations with such bureaucracy-based formulations has been a missed opportunity. It is not merely that Reed or even his acolytes have large platforms and loud echo chambers that have created the conditions whereby the same bad point needs to be continuously countered.

Is it still possible that a working-class movement can confront the fast-approaching endgame of now daily threats by both Biden and Trump to much more directly and harshly confront the militancy of the streets and workplaces, all under the guise of defeating the nefarious influences of "foreign actors," "anarchists," and "communists"?

The salience of such unnecessary oppositions is not merely the result of its frequent repetition in the realm of social media discourse. It has also developed as a matter of practical politics: through the orientation of rank and file strategy toward Bernie's second campaign and the demand that unions should endorse Bernie, and through short-cut strategies to persuade progressive-leaning union officials to do so. Political endorsements of this kind make particularly

poor hooks for campaigns for union democracy, contrary to the widely-held argument that Bernie's campaign prepared an especially fertile ground for recruiting union militants to socialist organization.

I am certain that more than a little bit of that did happen, of course, but at the cost of another also common dynamic—one in which strong partisans of any non-Bernie candidate inside our unions was unlikely to be drawn into the fight for reform or shop-floor power. They were given every reason to understand efforts to force endorsements from below as instrumental to Bernie supporters' enthusiasm for their candidate, rather than as an effort to fundamentally transform the relationship between members and our unions or as a campaign for democracy aimed at creating space for shop-floor power.

Bernie's campaign itself did do some wonderful promotion of shop-floor and rank and file organizing, including putting out calls for pickets to support teachers and autoworkers and raising solidarity funds for workers organizing in logistics, retail and elsewhere. While this use of campaign structures was far and away better than the use most other presidential candidates made of theirs, and much better than nothing, from the perspective of the most optimal use of socialist resources, these benefits for rank and file fights were marginal when considered against the vast amount of money raised from small, working-class donors or time expended. It is hard to take seriously the idea that these expenditures were the most efficient use of resources or most logical path to building independent worker o26rganization and militancy. What's more, the campaign also put out conflicting messages that at times directly countered the sort of consciousness that rank and file organizing is intended to cultivate.

Messages like "not me us" and "fight for someone you don't know" certainly echo the intention of

all sincere unionists and popularize a class-resonant sensibility. At the same time, many of Bernie's strongest supporters came to believe that the campaign was "our only hope" for health care or for socialism or political "revolution," so much that the intra-union concerns for lasting relationships among coworkers and fellow members might come to seem less urgent. Building trust and functional political points of unity between coworkers on the shop floor could and did fall by the wayside, at least, in the most urgent moments of the campaign.

Often the most intense battles could be between the leftmost, most engaged, members of a local, as conflict between Sandernistas and Warrenites heated up, leaving distrust in its wake beyond the Bernie boom. In my own local, one that is, admittedly, an outlier in a number of ways, a recent and brief campaign to pass a resolution in favor of removing cops from our campus garnered rank and file reformers an unprecedented number of full-time supporters. This was an exceedingly hopeful sign for the cross-title, cross-tier organizing we had not been able to achieve previously as a movement made up primarily of part-time contingent faculty members. In comparison, pushing for Bernie as our union's candidate (which I personally did, with passion!) reinforced the long-standing and strike-killing divide between tiers, even splitting the base of reform-minded adjuncts.

Admittedly, my union is strange in the US labor movement, but the way in which it is weird should in this case have turned a Bernie boost into a slam dunk. By any account, the PSC/CUNY faculty union has to be the single local with the highest percentage of formally affiliated socialists of any in the country. Our leadership, too, is socialist-heavy, though probably more in line with a number of other locals in various sectors. So we should have won this fight handily at least if the then-popular theory about Bernie's impact on

class consciousness and open appeal to socialism had any validity. If talking about popular class demands and saying the word "socialism" was calling socialists into being, we had a head start. But we didn't even get close.

In the end, I don't know of any unions where the fight to nominate Bernie won substantial new reforms for internal union democracy, or any major unions or even large locals, that were won to support for Bernie in this way absent a long-term, pre-Bernie reform movement in the union, begun and sustained by independent organizers.

In part because of the pressure of the specific exigencies of rank and fileism for Bernie, today's rank and filers appear, at times, to share political commitments contrary to both the letter of the original rank and file strategy and to the possibilities for an updated, timely version suggested in the first sections of this essay. In practice, the need to build a coalition (and fast!) collapsed distinctions between rank and file causes or reform-led unions and progressive but top-down ones. It erased the distinction between a staff-driven strategy and a worker-led one, vacillating between anti-racist and feminist stances and opposition to the self-organization of oppressed groups as a central plank of socialist strategy.

The latter impulse tilted toward not only Democratic Party politics, but a particular version of them. Still working on the theory of "coalition" and the premise of the primacy of elections, pushing for a rhetorical shift away from liberal feminism or anti-racism and toward a performative "class politics" that treats class as an identity rather than a position for organizing. Ultimately this seemingly endless tempest in a socialist media teapot—over a vision of class politics counter-posed to working-class, socialist commitments to anti-racism, feminism, and queer struggle—reflects more a struggle for turf and territory within a coalition of constituency brokers that includes labor officialdom rather than any clash of competing principle or even over clear and distinct strategic oppositions.

In the context of even the best electoral strategy for disrupting the Democratic Party as usual, it is easy to see how "class" can too easily stand in for the presumably disaffected, white, and usually male worker who might be won to vote for a Bernie, but not for a Warren or a Hillary. Just as Biden and the DNC triangulate with disaffected Republican moguls and suburbanites by pushing back on the self-organization of the left and then counting on their support, while focusing on winning an ambivalent and fundamentally conservative Joe Singlemalt, the structure of the Bernie campaign had a similar impact on the left, only the Joe in question was Rogan, or, at least a slice of his numerous and notably politically confused-to-committedly-chauvinist and conspiracy-prone listeners.

Even where the 21st-century expression of the rank and file strategy directly acknowledges the existence of a diverse working class, along with the continued salience of racism, the potential for subordination of potentially transformative shop-floor organizing to a progressive coalitional electoral strategy remains. This confusion is made possible by a lack of clarity around the nature and role of the union bureaucracy as a distinct layer, with distinct interests, one which the rank and file strategy in some ways itself leaves open, but about which Kim Moody himself is more clear in his writing.

It is a debate of long standing on the left and within the tradition that the rank and file strategy represents. For some, the purpose of rank and fileism has always been to challenge labor officialdom as a check on the potential power of workers, and to challenge the tendency of this layer to deploy union power in its own interests rather than those of members or the working

class as a whole. In this view, officials will, without both ideological commitment and significant pressure from below, always tend toward cutting deals with bosses and politicians, and to prefer member mobilization and show strikes to any potential for autonomous networks of organizing and power or political control among and by the ranks. The more conservative understanding has been that the conservatism of the bureaucracy is primarily a political problem, one which can in the necessary cases, be combated and redirected through member democracy.

The joining of the rank and file strategy to a Labor for Bernie electoral push presents a vision of rank and file decidedly in line with the second view, taking up a strategy replacing union officials who endorse Democratic Party centrists or even Republicans with new leadership that can get behind Bernie, and which requires for its biggest electoral impact an alliance with unions that are progressive on the outside but which might be totally internally undemocratic and present stark limits on rank and file workers' power, oppose or dampen shop floor activity and strike action.

Further, building the broadest labor coalition for electoral unity entails, at best, an agreement-to-disagree about which candidates should be endorsed and under what conditions, now that Bernie is out of the running. Most, if not all, unions—whether rank and file-led or otherwise, are under heavy pressure to revert to the age-old accommodation with Democratic Party candidates who openly endorse austerity, privatization, and the like, backed by bosses. The alternative, a break with the Democratic Party, rooted in a labor movement bloc, will be much more difficult to impossible to ever achieve if bureaucratic layers are able to constrain and limit the ongoing strike wave, also eliminating or limiting the potential for winning demands directly or organizing formal political power independent from the Democratic Party. Is it still possible that a working-class

movement can confront the fast-approaching endgame of now daily threats by both Biden and Trump to much more directly and harshly confront the militancy of the streets and workplaces, all under the guise of defeating the nefarious influences of "foreign actors," "anarchists," and "communists"? (I certainly hope the answer is ultimately in the affirmative.)

We are forced to wonder if workers, socialists, or the labor movement would be more or less prepared for this moment of post-Bernie crisis if a different strategy or a even simply a different version of the rank and file strategy had been taken up more widely over the last 4-5 years. This particularly given the DSA's important role in structuring the discontent of teachers in West Virginia and elsewhere; following the initial declaration by the confounded leaders of the AFT and NEA of a "victory," which was both unacceptable to members and unsigned even by the state legislators, Jacobin and DSA leaders gamely celebrated this "victory," even attributing it to the in fact recalcitrant bureaucrats of the teachers' unions.

When teachers and other education workers instead rejected the false victory in favor of turning an already illegal strike into a wildcat, the same forces from the top pushed for a resolution as quickly as possible and at the level of what an old socialist might call the minimum program. Union leaders quickly learned, and in subsequent state actions enacted, a strategy of turning strikes into protests and pushing protests toward an agenda of sweeping "red states" with a "blue wave" of electing Democrats. The largest socialist organization in decades in the United States was unable or unwilling to devote significant resources to spreading the strike, while connections between teachers' struggle and inchoate but widespread opposition to a wave of abortion bans[26] and a racist "anti-gang" bill in Kentucky were for the most part not developed[27]. As a result, West Virginia's achievement of statewide raises not

only for teachers but for all public sector employees represented the high water mark for victory in the teachers' red spring. A further analysis of the balance sheet of the still developing teacher struggle will be necessary to assess what we know about the evolution of the rank and file strategy in practice. It's certainly the arena that makes the strongest case for the DSA's rank and file strategy today—at the same time, it is also the sector that makes the strongest case for the importance and long-ranging long-lasting effects of independent socialist organizing as member-workers. Unfortunately that full explication will have to wait for another essay.

As we consider the possibilities for a rank and file strategy On New Terrain, we have to not only update the strategy on paper but in practice, in situ, as part of a new flowering of socialist organization, openness, and commitment that represents promise and peril for the strategy. Can the strategy, taken up by a new and growing layer of socialists, transform not only the workers' movement but the socialist one? Can it build its rank and file-oriented slice as a large but non-sectarian left pole for a broader socialist movement? Can DSA itself confront its history as a vehicle for the labor bureaucracy and the continued assertion of a bureaucratic and crude class reductionism by influential and unaccountable socialist influencers in their organization's name? What is or might be the influence of rank and filiesm outside the DSA and distinct from strategies for Democratic party realignment or

the "dirty break"? Is there any more (or perhaps less?) hope for a realizable explication of the relationships between shop floor organizing, class independence and socialist politics and party implied in Moody's original strategy? At what point does socialist organization and strategy become, again, the object of the rank and file strategy rather than itself simply a pool for locating and sustaining organizers committed to working on the shop floor? What, if any, strategy might have better prepared the DSA, or even simply rank and file organizers of all stripes to respond to the ongoing uprising for Black Lives, as an opportunity for building on existing organization and how might socialists now do that anyway? How could we still, as a class, and as socialists, organize to win the demands of the movement?

The answer to these questions depend in large part on the commitments and vision of the activists who now take up the banner. To that end, a careful reading of Moody both then and now, with an eye toward the opportunities that exist now but weren't available to the Moody of 17 years ago, would be an excellent first, or, at least, second step. An electorally oriented workerism that imagines the Democratic Party as both the logical object and necessary conclusion to this politics has little relationship to Moody's rank and file strategy in the context of his broader work, especially to the insights in On New Terrain, and even less to the potential for bottom-up, worker-led, socialist politics today. ■

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IV. Organization

Introduction to Organization

Jean RD Allen & Teresa Kalisz

The last decade has placed the question of organization front and center within the socialist left. Anything we do, from building a base to organizing for social reform necessitates engaging in this question. But what type of organization? This question has many answers. Some answers might be labor or tenants unions, others canvassing operations. These organizations emerge from relatively clear practices and their forms often defined by the particularities of their respective struggles or campaigns. But one type of organization often hotly debated by both proponents and detractors is also one of the most vague: political organization or in other words, the Party.

Much ink has been spilled on this question, often defending an orthodoxy of a particular tendency. The idea of The Party often forms a key part of the self justification of most socialist organizations, that *they* will be the ones to build or become the revolutionary party. But the idea of the party as being merely an independent ballot line in an ecosystem still dominated by the Democratic machine's apparatuses is an empty one. Similarly, the idea of the party as the manifestation and culmination of some talk-shop Bolshevik's delusions of grandeur isn't satisfying. What is at stake

in the question of the Party and of Organization is not some imagined future goal which justifies our current situation. Rather, any answer we have to the question of the party must be rooted firmly in our current practice. The Party is the means by which a handful of revolutionaries arrive at the realization of the working class as a revolutionary subject, and it is time that it was treated to a systemic analysis rather than treated as an aesthetic or mere justification of our current unimportance.

This relationship is especially important for us to consider if we want to move beyond the apolitical and sectarian perspectives of base building that AATB developed. To this end we have included the following two pieces in our dossier. One, Two, Three, Many Parties of Autonomy and the Collective Mind.

One, Two, Three, Many Parties of Autonomy presents a vision of communist political organization which cuts straight to this relationship. It tells us that every revolutionary period can be understood as an ecosystem of different organizations, and that by understanding ourselves as a part of an ecosystem rather than a failed whole of it, we can organize in a far more dynamic fashion.

That political bodies can empower the working class, and build the scaffolding for something ever growing, but only through a protracted process of inquiry and social investigation and relationship building, only through a constant process of struggle. This role rather than presenting the party as an organization acting on behalf of the class, respects the autonomy of workers organizations, creating a symbiotic rather than domineering relationship.

This extends into their vision of political organizations themselves. Rather than seeking to force all socialists into one organization, they present a vision of an ecosystem of revolutionary organizations. This avoids the pitfalls common in our current 'all under one big tent' strategy, which has often resulted in anti-democratic subversion of dissent or avoidance of key line struggles. Each organization struggles for their vision of revolution united with others in coalition under a shared goal of social transformation.

The second piece in this section gets to another vital aspect of organization, the role of democracy. While the left presents themselves as champions of democracy, the shallowness of our idea of democracy makes it easy to cast it aside in the name of haste or efficacy. Organizational Democracy demands, and, furthermore, *creates* skills and structures which strengthen us as revolutionaries, forcing us to honestly assess our work and to address each other *as peers*. It demands the development of a thoroughly egalitarian culture which subverts the logic of management which we live so much of our lives under.

The piece by CounterPower connects with this transformative understanding of the role of democracy through its description of a cadre party. Rather than being an over-disciplined body with a subservient membership, it describes an organization where rank and file membership development and democratic control drives deeper roots into the class, fostering a democratic culture inside and outside of the revolutionary organization.

Together these two pieces form a serious intervention into the types organizations essential for a revolutionary and political approach to base building. ■

One, Two, Three, Many Parties of Autonomy

Counter Power

Chapter of Counter Power's book, Organizing for Autonomy, published on Regeneration Magazine.

Our time is one of significant political crisis. The façade of the neoliberal consensus manufactured by the imperialist ruling class has shattered and through the cracks has poured a renewed interest in left politics, both reformist and revolutionary. This renewed interest has helped to reinvigorate the revolutionary left, with a groundswell of independent socialist and communist groups forming across the (so-called) United States. With the rise of this new generation of revolutionary groups comes the return of old questions regarding communist political organization. In particular, the question of the party has again come to the fore.

As revolutionaries in the twenty-first century, we return to the subject of the party-form to ask some fundamental questions: What is the party and why is it necessary? Who belongs to it and who is excluded? What is its role in the revolutionary movement? Should we relate to the party differently today than past movements did? The following essay is an excerpt from the forthcoming book Organizing for Autonomy: History, Theory, and Strategy for Collective Liberation (Common Notions 2020), written by members of CounterPower, an affiliate of the Marxist Center. It is an attempt to address "the party question" with a suggestion that the problem of political organization will not be solved by founding a singular mass party. Rather, at our current conjuncture, we see a solution to the problem of communist

political organization as being the formation of multiple "parties of autonomy." Through the historical process of revolutionary struggle, we see the proliferation and networking of these party organizations culminating in the creation of an "area of the party." It is in relation to the development of this area—of which we hope the Marxist Center will play an integral part—that we see the potential for a successful movement for communism to emerge in the twenty-first century.

From strike committees to workers' councils, tenant unions to neighborhood assemblies, the disparate forms of organized autonomy that arise during a protracted revolutionary struggle will not automatically fuse with communist politics to create a cohesive system of counterpower. Nor will a majority of the proletarian and popular social groups automatically unite with the communist movement. The imperialist world-system exerts tremendous pressure against the organic emergence of a communist worldview on a mass scale. Reformism, authoritarianism, bureaucratism, and social chauvinism within the movement can divert grassroots struggles away from a revolutionary path. What organizational form can facilitate the political development of the mass movement in a communist direction? What form can foster communication, cooperation, and coordination across multiple fronts of struggle and movement sectors? We believe the answer is found in the construction of an independent communist political organization, or party of autonomy.

This is not a call for a party of the bourgeois type. Social revolutions are made by the autonomous initiative of a revolutionary people, not by counting votes or coup d'état. We reject parties that aim to take control of the existing state machinery.1 Rosa Luxemburg identified a revolutionary party of autonomy as the "most conscious, purposeful part of the proletariat, which points the entire broad mass of the working class toward its historical tasks at every step," always linking its grassroots political work to the ultimate goal of communism.[2] It is a connective party, establishing linkages between different fronts of struggle through social investigations and organizational networks, connecting local and national concerns with an analysis of the world situation and the tasks of the world revolution.[3] Such a party strengthens the organized autonomy of the proletarian and popular social groups at the base, recognizing that the people come to act as a collective revolutionary subject only through the self-management of the revolutionary struggle itself. This fighting revolutionary party is nothing less than a partisan war machine: an instrument for laying siege to imperialism.[4]

A party of autonomy does not stand outside or above the revolutionary process. Rather, such a party is internal to this process, as an integral and complementary part of an emerging system of counterpower. Thus, a party of autonomy is a dialectical product of, and active factor in, the development of revolutionary consciousness, self-organization, and self-activity among the proletarian and popular social groups.[5] A party is simply the self-organization of revolutionaries. As Agustín Guillamón has emphasized, multiple revolutionary organizations, groups, and tendencies will emerge in a revolutionary situation. In their totality, these groups constitute the historical party of communism, which is locked in antagonistic struggle against the historical party of imperialism (which is also constituted by multiple organizations, groups, and tendencies).[6] The anarchist Errico Malatesta described the historical party of communism as including "all who are on the same side … [who] struggle for the same ends against common adversaries and enemies. But this does not mean it is possible—or even desirable—for all of us to be gathered into one specific association."[7] Given diverse political situations and the prevailing fragmentation of proletarian and popular social groups, a high degree of organizational flexibility is required. We believe room must be made not only for multiple factions and caucuses within a singular party of autonomy, but also for multiple parties within the broader communist movement: "Let a hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools of thought contend."[8]

The formation and development of a party of autonomy is a process that embodies both micropolitical and macropolitical dimensions.[9] The ability to mediate between the two has been a distinguishing feature of successful revolutionary parties. In the Russian Revolution of 1917, clusters of Bolshevik party activists concentrated in workplaces recognized that the grassroots councils (soviets) emerging from the struggles of workers embodied the nuclei of an alternative social system.[10] Thus, the party's organization at the point of production enabled revolutionaries to link workplace struggles against exploitation with the struggle against imperialism and to link the emergent councils with the insurrectionary struggle to establish a system of territorial counterpower.[11]

A party of autonomy fuses with organs of counterpower and people's defense organizations. It organizes tactical and strategic united fronts, with the aim of articulating a system of counterpower that can contend with the authoritarian state for territorial control. It wages struggle on the terrain of everyday life—the workplace, neighborhood, school, prison, or barracks—and moves within the flow of emergent networks, structures, and processes. This requires coordination, discipline, planning, and unity in action.[12] At all scales

of operation, a party of autonomy presents the most advanced demands and deploys its most capable militants to the front lines of the revolutionary struggle and within emergent organs of counterpower.[15]

A party is a part of an emergent system of counterpower. Far from seeking to dominate the autonomous liberation struggles of the proletarian and popular social groups, "the party must be built in the fire of struggles, step by step, under the control of the mass political movement."[14] Such a party aims to root itself among the oppressed masses, participate in their struggles, "and thus organize while being organized by the masses."[15] If the social revolution is indeed "a process of assemblage" that links multiple fronts of struggle into a united front, then the party functions as the key instrument of linkage.[16]

Articulation and Fusion: The Functions of a Party Organization

What are the functions of a party of autonomy? Revolutionary parties operate as articulators of a communist praxis. Concretely, such organizations help to articulate: (1) the communist content implicit in grassroots social struggles via militant social investigation that combines a practice of inquiry with relentless agitation, education, and organization; and (2) an area of autonomy composed of heterogeneous—and at times contradictory—social forces, reaching an organizational apex first with the formation of a system of counterpower, and later with the establishment of a territorial commune. As Salar Mohandesi puts it, the work of articulation performed by a party of autonomy is twofold: "On the one hand, to articulate is to communicate, formulate, or express a given content by moving it to a different register. On the other hand, to articulate is to join separate elements together, and the articulator, in this sense, can be understood as the joint itself."[17] A few historical examples may serve to elucidate the

role and function of a party of autonomy as an articulator of a communist praxis.

Throughout the Great Depression, the Alabama Communist Party fused Marxist theory with local cultures, articulating the communist content implicit in Southern Black resistance to racial oppression and class exploitation and building an area of autonomy consisting of Black rural sharecroppers, industrial workers, the unemployed, women, poor whites, and radical youth. It achieved this through organizations such as the Trade Union Unity League, Sharecroppers' Union, National Committee of Unemployed Councils, Young Communist League, and Alabama Farmers' Relief Fund. In addition to campaigns for Black self-determination, antiracist class unity, unemployment and underemployment relief, eviction and foreclosure defense, rank-and-file unionism, wage increases, public education, and voter rights, the local units of the Communist Party published Southern Worker, a regional communist newspaper with a focus on Black liberation and proletarian class struggle. In the words of Robin D.G. Kelley:

> *The Party offered more than a vehicle for social contestation; it offered a framework for understanding the roots of poverty and racism, linked local struggles to world politics, challenged not only the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy but the petite bourgeois racial politics of the Black middle class, and created an atmosphere in which ordinary people could analyze, discuss, and criticize the society in which they lived.*[18]

Another historical example is the Iberian Anarchist Federation (Federación Anarquista Ibérica, or FAI).[19] The FAI formed in 1927 with the aim of establishing a symbiotic relationship with the National Confederation of Labor (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, or CNT). It worked to unite

anarcho-communist forces throughout the Iberian peninsula and diaspora in order to struggle against reactionary currents in the CNT, articulate the communist content implicit in class struggle, and accelerate the development of a revolutionary situation.[20] All FAI cadre were expected to agree with anarcho-communist principles and join a local CNT union.[21] Within those unions, FAI cadre established a trabazón or "organic link" between the two organizations, effectively fusing anarcho-communist vision (embodied in the FAI) with the anarcho-syndicalist strategy of rank-and-file class struggle unionism (embodied in the CNT).[22] Joint councils operated as a hub or point of convergence for both the CNT rank-and-file and FAI cadre.[23] This trabazón did not aim to subordinate the CNT to the FAI. It was a pedagogical relationship, whereby the FAI sought to unleash the emancipatory currents within the CNT and to push back against conservative elements within the workers' movement. The aim was to cultivate a symbiotic interdependency within a broader system of counterpower, in which each organization retained a relative degree of autonomy in pursuit of a common objective: social revolution for the establishment of libertarian communism on a world scale.

The FAI created a revolutionary party of autonomy of a specifically anarchist character. The radical achievements of the proletariat and peasantry in Spain during this period are partially attributable to the immense effort and sacrifice of FAI cadres to rebuild the CNT in the face of reformism and state repression and to advance a specifically anarcho-communist vision. FAI cadres within the CNT ceaselessly worked to initiate an insurrectionary rupture with the old society, emphasizing that the counter-hegemonic communal governance of the working class could only be established via grassroots participatory democracy in federations of unions, assemblies, committees, councils, and collectives. However,

while the FAI embodied a party of autonomy in its historical functioning, its lack of political cohesion around a sufficiently developed platform and program, combined with a propensity to engage in reckless armed actions, limited its effectiveness as an articulator of communist content, especially as the Spanish proletariat and peasantry stepped onto the battlefield of civil war.

In Chile, the Revolutionary Left Movement (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, or MIR) exemplified a party of autonomy, operating as a catalyst in the construction of autonomous popular power, which included grassroots fighting organizations, alternative institutions, defense groups, united fronts, and a nuanced relationship with electoral politics. A diverse group of militants founded MIR in 1965 at the University of Concepción. By 1973, the MIR would have more than ten thousand members engaged in organizing students, staff, and faculty on university campuses, the urban poor in shantytowns, peasants in the countryside, rank-and-file industrial workers in the unions, and soldiers in the armed forces. During the presidency of Salvador Allende, the MIR radicalized the grassroots base of the Popular Unity coalition (Unidad Popular, or UP), and subsequently led the antifascist resistance against the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. In their grassroots political work, MIR cadre emphasized popular self-organization through expropriations (tomas), the formation of communal workers' councils, and the construction of a revolutionary people's army.

The MIR nucleus emerged from the Left University Movement (Movimiento Universitario de Izquierda, or MUI), which was based on popular assemblies. Like their New Left contemporaries in other countries, MUI demanded that the university be opened to all and democratically governed by a community of students, staff, and faculty.[24] MUI revolutionaries would go on to form the core

leadership of the MIR, which combined participatory democracy in popular assemblies and communal councils with militant direct action via occupations and expropriations. The MIR later replicated the assembly-based model initially developed by the MUI, extending it beyond the city of Concepción to Chile as a whole, encompassing a multitude of grassroots social struggles.

One of the MIR's most important projects was Campamento Lenin, an encampment in Concepción that served as a home for 3,000 pobladores [houseless urban poor]. While many organizations fought for housing justice, the MIR was unique in emphasizing direct action and the prefiguration of communism. According to historian Marian Schlotterbeck, the MIR "promoted direct actions in the form of tomas de terrenos urbanos, literally taking unoccupied urban lands, as a means to create territorial expressions of popular power."[25] Following expropriation and occupation, the MIR helped create communal forms of governance based on autonomous popular assemblies, thereby developing a minor communist politics understood "as participation, as liberation, and as a means to equality."[26] Through Campamento Lenin, the MIR articulated communist politics and a counter-hegemonic alliance. It organized the mass expropriation of land for housing, bringing together pobladores, students, labor unions, and communist political organizations into a solidarity committee, which reflected MIR strategy to forge a revolutionary people by uniting multiple sectors of struggle.[27] The origins of Campamento Lenin can be traced to the MIR's militant social investigations. Local miristas, primarily students, surveyed the everyday problems faced by pobladores in the shantytowns in order to build a network of contacts and identify prospective plots of land for expropriation. Upon the completion of an initial survey, miristas would synthesize the information collected to formulate a programmatic orientation for popular mobilization.[28]

From its initial base among students in the MUI to organizing pobladores and Campamento Lenin, the MIR laid the groundwork to expand its infrastructure. It built organs of counterpower among industrial workers in the coal mining and textile industries through the Revolutionary Workers Front (Frente de Trabajadores Revolucionarios, or FTR), and among rural workers through the Revolutionary Peasant Movement (Movimiento Campesino Revolucionario, or MCR). Its ultimate aim was to link these diverse fronts of struggle a system of counterpower, culminating with the formation of a Popular Assembly to express the will of an emergent revolutionary people.[29]

The MIR took cadre development extremely seriously. According to mirista Carlos Robles, "It wasn't just show up and do some activity—like pass out pamphlets or sell El Rebelde—no, there was a space for reflection. A space for everything because it wasn't just politics that we had, there was also personal growth (formación humana)—this is important—the development of the individual as such."[30] The base organizations of the MIR advanced a communist praxis that prioritized full human development and the politicization of everyday life, pushing the boundaries of what constituted the political.[31] The MIR's holistic praxis of liberation enabled them to overcome class differences internally, despite the organization's initial base among students and faculty at a single university: "The investment the MIR made in forming militants was also an investment in forming people—instilling a sense that each voice mattered and each person had something to contribute to the revolutionary struggle in Chile."[32] It was this dialogic pedagogy practiced by MIR base organizations that enabled them to win the trust of the urban and rural poor, peasants, and industrial workers who went on to join the MIR and make it their own.

A Cadre Party

These case studies provide inspiring examples of the concrete operations of a party of autonomy. With minimal personnel and resources, initially concentrated in limited geographic areas and among particular sectors of the proletarian and popular social groups, these revolutionary parties patiently organized an area of autonomy. Informed by a revolutionary vision of communism and a strategy of protracted struggle, they inspired masses of people to fight for radical change. In all of the above examples, the conscious recruitment, development, and coordination of cadre made victories possible. The word cadre is of French origin, meaning "framework." Cadre are "active worker-organizers," or "a multilayered stratum of activists committed to the movement's continuity through the ups and downs of its daily routine."[33]

Parties of autonomy can be understood as cadre organizations, assembling frameworks that inform the everyday praxis of communist partisans operating in a variety of contexts. Such a framework should include: (1) a platform articulating an analysis of the imperialist world-system from the standpoint of the proletarian and popular social groups, a vision of a communist alternative, and a strategy of protracted revolutionary struggle; (2) a program that emerges from militant social investigations and which articulates the concrete tasks of cadre in symbiotic relationship with emerging grassroots social struggles; and (3) an organizational culture and style of doing politics that is collective, creative, humble, patient, militant, and open to refinement and transformation. Reflecting upon the legacy of the New Communist Movement of the 1970s and '80s in North America, movement veteran Max Elbaum emphasizes the importance of cadre organization:

> Revolutionary spirit, hard work, personal sacrifice, and the willingness to subordinate individual interests to the political tasks at hand are all crucial qualities for a successful radical movement. So too is the commitment to sink roots among the exploited and oppressed and to struggle within the movement over inequalities of class, race, and gender. And—whether or not they are now in fashion—so are organizations capable of functioning on the basis of well-worked out strategies, unity in action, and a measure of collective discipline.[34]

Cadre organize to help others develop their own potential.[35] However, what distinguishes a party of autonomy's cadre from other types of organizers is that they have a common political platform and program to orient their work and an organizational center to which they are accountable.[36] Specifically, a party of autonomy should focus on producing and circulating the knowledge and skills needed to build organized autonomy, including organs of counterpower, people's defense organizations, and united fronts. Cadre build conscious forms of collective leadership, which for Ella Baker meant "leadership that helped people to help themselves and allowed ordinary people to feel that they could determine their own future."[37] The forms of organized autonomy that allow masses of people to exercise self-management, self-government, and self-determination do not emerge spontaneously. Cadre intentionally exercise collective leadership to assist their initial formation and guide their development towards revolutionary objectives in symbiotic relation with the masses.[38]

The basic organizational unit of a party of autonomy at the level of a municipality or neighborhood could be the local branch, which functions as a hub for the organization's activities. The local branch could convene meetings of members on a regular basis, collect dues, organize political education workshops and technical trainings, and

conduct militant social investigations to inform the initial selection of sites of struggle where the party organization focuses its time, energies, and resources. At the territorial level, a party could convene organizational congresses consisting of delegates from each local branch, which could in turn elect a coordinating committee to maintain the day-to-day operations of the party, encompassing communications, publications, finances, and the intentional cultivation of comradely relations and alliances with other revolutionary organizations and sectors of the movement.

As a local branch grows in size and capacity, it could create clusters, or smaller fractions of comrades formed on the basis of common affinities and concentration in a common front of struggle. Each cluster could function as an intimate space for political education, mutual aid, and the forging of a shared political praxis. This is a cellular organization, as advocated by Ella Baker, who "envisioned small groups of people working together but also retaining contact in some form with other such groups, so that coordinated action would be possible whenever large numbers really were necessary."[39] The political cohesion and strategic unity of these forces can enable effective operational and tactical convergence or dispersion, in accordance with the situation encountered. However, the communicative burden for such organizational forms is high, as each cluster must have the capacity not only to send and receive information, but to process it quickly.

As a member of the Alabama Communist Party from Birmingham once remarked: "There ain't one of us here who was born a communist; we learned it and it ain't easy to learn."[40] A party of autonomy functions simultaneously as a school, workshop, and laboratory for learning, testing, and refining the craft of revolutionary organizing. A party organization is thus an instrument

for aggregating, collectivizing, and circulating knowledge co-produced through past and present cycles of struggle in order to strengthen the possibilities for future victories. It is an organization of revolutionaries by trade and,as with any trade, the grassroots political work conducted by party cadre requires time, patience, commitment, openness, and reflexivity.[41]

The party organization should develop political education programs to foster collective leadership. It cannot effectively agitate, educate, and organize for communism if it lacks a sufficient base of trained cadre who are transformed with time and experience into battle-hardened veterans of protracted revolutionary struggle. During the initial process of formation, a party organization will need to focus on internal programs. Such internal programs could include: (1) political education to strengthen the knowledge, skills, and capacities of individual cadre; (2) the production of agitational and educational materials (such as literature, podcasts, films, and posters) to popularize the politics of the organization and to hone the skills of cadre in disseminating these materials; (3) recruitment, since future projects depend upon a sizable and growing core of cadre to enable an effective division of tasks, a rotation of responsibilities, and a capacity for increasingly complex projects. To ensure that the party organization maintains a responsive and symbiotic relationship with the masses, each project should be subject to a critical assessment of its effectiveness. The combination of organizational discipline, unity around a common political platform and program, and autonomy of local branches and clusters, along with the development of an organizational culture and style of work synchronized with local conditions and customs, makes for an organization with a greater capacity to organize an area of autonomy, build a system of counterpower, resist counter-revolutionary repression, and prefigure the social relations of communism.

The Area of the Party

In order to consolidate the communist movement, we are faced with the question of unity, or the task of forging bonds of solidarity among multiple revolutionary parties, grounded in mutual respect for the independence of each organization and a recognition that no one organization or tendency can or will have all the answers. As Jose Carlos Mariátegui emphasized, "the existence of defined and precise tendencies and groups is not an evil. On the contrary, it is the sign of an advanced period of the revolutionary process. What matters is that these groups and tendencies know how to understand themselves when facing the concrete reality of the day."[42] The task is to unify the communist movement on the basis of "contingent, concrete, and practical action."[43]

To achieve this unity in diversity—to create a "neighborhood of a thousand flags"[44]—we propose building a network of interorganizational communication, cooperation, and coordination among multiple revolutionary parties. We call this the area of the party, or "a party of a networked type."[45] Instead of sects competing with each other for dominance, each organization could operate as a complementary part of a more complex whole. Within this organizational ecology, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, while the associated parties are defined by their practical initiatives.[46] The crucial aspect is that the relative autonomy of each affiliate organization is respected and leadership functions are distributed throughout the network, where "each member can play, from time to time, a hegemonic role," with room for divergent perspectives on certain issues within an overall context of unity in action.[47] Whether this area of the party ultimately coalesces into a unitary party organization we leave open to contingency.

The area of the party, in our conception, is segmentary, polycentric, and networked.[48] It is segmentary because it is composed of multiple party organizations or "segments," each with their own political platform, program, and style of work.[49] This segmentary character enables the area of the party to permeate different sectors of society and fronts of struggle simultaneously, reflecting the various standpoints and forms of life articulated by the proletarian and popular social groups.[49] With multiple party organizations, a division of labor can be established with varying degrees of specialization at certain nodes and with fail-safe measures distributed throughout the network. A measure of redundancy, duplication, and overlap contributes to overall system reliability, while the capacity to propose "many different solutions to a problem [is] the institutional equivalent to biodiversity in the ecosystem."[50] Within this pluralist organizational ecology, a culture of emulation among the affiliated organizations can amplify and accelerate dynamics of experimentation, adaptive learning, and militancy. Instead of a singular and undifferentiated political line for all times and places, different strategic, operational, and tactical approaches can be tested in a range of situations, with area-wide learning facilitated through an integrated information and communications infrastructure.

The area of the party is polycentric because it does not consist of a single central leadership, instead opting for collective leadership distributed at various scales through multiple leadership centers.[51] Horizontality and verticality, centralism and decentralism, are not absolute principles, but contingent possibilities whose effective applications rest upon acknowledging the dialectical relation between these polarities along with analyses of concrete situations.[52] We must determine "what balances to strike between openness and closure, dispersion and unity, strategic action and process, and so forth."[53] Formal leadership positions should be rotated and held directly accountable to the rank-and-file membership of the affiliated

organizations through regular area-wide assemblies. The area of the party reintroduces a dialectical method of analysis into the science of revolutionary organization, recognizing both the situational and strategic dimensions of leadership. Against "leaderless" resistance, we posit a "leaderful" revolutionary movement.[54]

Finally, the area of the party is networked, which enables the associated parties "to exchange information and ideas and to coordinate participation in joint action."[55] As the imperialist world-system has already adopted a networked approach to counter-revolution through forms of inter-agency cooperation, revolutionaries would be wise to recognize that "it takes a network to fight a network."[56] This integrated network could be maintained through traveling educators, agitators, and organizers; overlapping membership across affiliate party organizations; integrated information and communications infrastructure; joint initiatives, projects, and campaigns; and recognition of a common struggle, a common enemy, and a common objective, even if the particularities of each affiliate party's analysis, vision, and strategy diverge on specific points. At the level of a neighborhood or municipality, the area of the party could emerge through joint councils or "fusion centers" to coordinate the activities of various party branches and collectives concentrated in a common zone. Indeed, the construction of this integrated network could itself function as the scaffolding for articulating a system of counter-power from within the area of autonomy, constituting the institutional basis of a communal social system.

A segmentary, polycentric, and networked area of the party may prove to be resilient in the face of counter-revolutionary repression and adaptive in the face of a rapidly changing terrain of struggle. There are several potential sources of this resiliency. As Luther P. Gerlach argues, "To the extent that local groups are autonomous

and self-sufficient, some are likely to survive the destruction of others. This is also true of leaders; some will survive and even become more active and radical when others are removed, retired, or co-opted."[57] Furthermore, distributing and rotating leadership functions throughout the area of the party can help mitigate the consequences of burnout, as another group can pick up the banner of revolution and carry it forward into battle.

The area of the party has several historical precedents. During the Salvadoran Revolution and Civil War (1979–1992), there emerged a united front of revolutionary anti-imperialist forces, encompassing an alliance of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, or FMLN) and Revolutionary Democratic Front (Frente Democrático Revolucionario, or FDR), which fought together under the banner of the "FMLN-FDR."[58] While the FDR united a network of mass organizations, such as labor unions, peasant associations, barrio committees, and student groups, the FMLN united five revolutionary parties to coordinate a common politico-military struggle. The FMLN thus constituted an area of the party embedded within a broader area of autonomy encompassing the liberated zones within the guerrilla territories, the base organizations affiliated with the FDR, and the more diffuse organizations and militants outside FMLN-FDR networks. What made the FMLN unique was that it established a mechanism of communication, coordination, and cooperation among the various politico-military organizations—El Salvador's area of the party—in a common revolutionary struggle with a common program. The five parties affiliated to the FMLN each maintained their own organizational autonomy, while five commanders, one representing each party, collectively made decisions for the FMLN as a whole.[59] As one FMLN guerrilla put it: "There's a real danger of each group going its own way, but it's also difficult to decree unity. We have genuine differences of approach, and the answer is not for every

organization to renounce its beliefs in the name of unity. That smells of Stalinism to me."[60]

The Guatemalan Revolution and Civil War (1960–1996) displayed many features similar to those in El Salvador. After years of sectarianism, rivalry, non-cooperation, and "zonalization" (where each revolutionary organization controlled a territory that was not to be encroached upon by others), four revolutionary parties came together under the umbrella of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, or URNG) in January 1982. During the course of the revolutionary struggle, leadership functions within the URNG were rotated among affiliate parties. The URNG stated that it was "fighting for space, not for itself as a political party, but for the formulation of alternative, popularly based solutions to the country's crises."[61] The URNG did not see itself as the future holder of state power, but as a revolutionary catalyst working to deepen, defend, and expand the broader mass movement.[62] What emerged from the experience of the URNG by the end of the 1980s was a clear distinction between the area of the party (embodied in the URNG and its affiliate party organizations) and the area of autonomy (embodied in the popular organizations of the mass movement). The ultimate aim was to achieve "a popular/revolutionary convergence," or the articulation of a system of counterpower from among these disparate elements:

> *The formulations [of the URNG] concerning alliances reflected new thinking about the relationship of revolutionary forces to the popular movement as the latter reemerged. On the one hand, all parties had learned the painful lessons of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when some popular organizations were more exposed to repression because of their open identification with the guerrilla movement. On the other hand, it was also important to overcome the disarticulation that existed in the 1980s between the revolutionary left and (non-clandestine) popular movements. The challenge was to define a new relationship, taking into account a necessary degree of autonomy of the popular organizations.*[63]

Judging from the accumulated historical experience of revolutionary struggles against imperialism, it appears unlikely that a monolithic mass party will prove useful (or even possible) for today's communist movement. The forging of a revolutionary movement for communism will likely result from the converging efforts of multiple revolutionary parties (the area of the party) with a more expansive network of autonomous mass organizations and defense groups (the area of autonomy). Indeed, in our conjuncture we already see the emergence of a variety of revolutionary organizations involved in building autonomous mass organizations, from the Red Nation to the New Afrikan Black Panther Party, Symbiosis to the Marxist Center. As communist partisans, it is our role to facilitate the growth of this emergent area of the party, foster comradely communication and cooperation among all revolutionary organizations, and commit ourselves to seeing the protracted revolutionary struggle for liberation through to victory. ◼

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The Collective Mind

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Introduction

In comrade Davenport's Organizing For Power[1], she notes a central problem with contemporary socialist organization. Many organizations work along an informal rule of thumb which fosters a culture of unsustainable engagement and burnout. With an underdeveloped separation of labor, these groups are often captured by a handful of people who possess technical skills which they are uninterested in teaching to others. Davenport lays both of these at the feet of a lack of organizational theory within the Left, and proposes an embrace of Frederick Winslow Taylor's Scientific Management and an appreciation of Bogdanov's work as a 'Constructive Socialism' which can surpass previous scientific socialisms as a corrective to this worrying tendency.

Comrade Davenport is correct that the ad hoc methods that organizers have developed over the last generation are insufficient to the task of running contemporary political organizations. More than insufficient, they are actively detrimental:

> *"Organizers," through their personal charisma and promise of winning immediate gains, incentivize people to use their initiative towards their campaigns. Group members receive general tasks and an expectation to complete them, either by themselves or with a few other people. It doesn't matter whether it's the top-down orders of the leadership or democratic vote by the group; activists are tacitly encouraged to take on an unsustainable load, leading to burnout. Organizers don't teach activists to draw healthy boundaries between their own needs and what is reasonable to contribute. If they don't burn out, activists drop out as they lose interest in work that comes to seem increasingly futile.[2]*

Whether this is a product of a conscious choice against structure or merely the lack of it, we are left with a persistent culture of churn, with people entering organizations, being pushed to take on too much work, and leaving them without having imparted any kind of general lessons.

Davenport is also correct that we must replace ad hoc rules with a science of organization. She sees Taylorist scientific management as the way through this, arguing that:

> *Theory and practice aren't two separate poles united dialectically; they're one continuous process. Theorizing is just one part of the labor process. Whether it is drafting blueprints for a machine or solving a malfunction, every stage of the labor process requires both manual and mental labor. Beyond "scientific socialism," we*

need constructive socialism. Constructive socialism has a long provenance stretching back to thinkers like James Connolly and Eugene Debs. It calls for the positive creation of new working-class power and the nucleus of the new society now, without waiting for revolutionary rupture. To realize this aim, our movement should make use of any technology suitable to the task.

At this point we part ways. While we do need to utilize all tools available to us, that has to be done with the knowledge that no tool is inert, able to be easily used towards any end. Attempt to hammer in a screw and you will quickly discover this: the screw implies the screwdriver. Taylorism confronted the complex problems of managing humans and solved this problem by treating people the same way one would treat machines, allowing engineering principles to be applied to the human body. We cannot extract class power from technological processes, least of all management science. Bourgeois management science is more than a justification for class rule, it *is* class rule in practice. Taylorism, Fordism, lean production, these are not just vague concepts, they are the way people experience capitalist domination in their everyday life. Even if these techniques narrowly 'work' within industrial production, they have only been able to deal with knowledge and organizational production through a programme of deskilling and homogenizing. Deskilling can be useful, tasks can become overly baroque when they are in the hands of a single person. But deskilling is not a liberatory process, is not an empowering process, it has been, first and foremost, a way to discipline labor. It is easy to make an undemocratic, scientifically managed organization. Almost every firm operates this way.

That is not to say that there is not a science of organization. Such a science does exist, but is not pre-arranged for us to find in the wild. Bourgeois management science is one aspect of it, but just as

Marx was not able to just take English economics, German philosophy, or French revolutionary politics and transform them into a revolutionary political economy, we cannot just take management science and be done with it. Because bourgeois management science is the method and program of class rule, its theory comes from a manager's perspective. Comrade Davenport seeks to resolve this by deskilling the manager out of existence, while applying the manager's programme to our organization. That is a tremendously undialectical perspective. A science of organization would not be oriented towards the creation of a perfected assembly line *sans* manager. It would be oriented towards a constant expansion of our analytical lens, both continually integrating our new experiences into our plans, and by abolishing the separation between researcher and researched.

But as practitioners, we cannot just be concerned with the science of organization. Organizing is so often interpersonal, intuitive, time-limited, and contextual. We are dealing not with objective facts or with technicalities but with the insides of the human mind. In such circumstances there is still, unquestionably, an element of science, but there is an element of craft, of art, as well. Consider the difference between a new and a seasoned volunteer reading a script. While a new volunteer may sound wooden, or drop into a robotic patter, a seasoned volunteer can make a script their own, improvise, and come off naturally even when they're reciting something they're recited a dozen times before. Outside of our knowledge about the world, history, political economy and organizing, mobilizing others and empowering others as equals is a *skill*, one that our society does not easily teach us.

We are faced with two tasks, then: how do we develop organizational science at the level of the organization, and how do we develop organizational art within individual organizers. How do you teach strategic thinking and technical skills, organizationally? How can you do this when what

you are trying to *teach* is a subject which can only be learned in practice? We must make sure our comrades have not only the technical skills to support our campaigns, but the political ability to make their own. Thankfully, we have a tool in our hands for this: democracy.

What is the point of democracy? Often we counterpose a positively coded democracy with the autocracy that people experience constantly in their day to day lives. But if we consign 'democracy' to being just 'good', we are laying the foundations for democracy's undermining in practice even if we affirm it in word. Almost everywhere in the left democracy is affirmed at the point of decision and then cast aside at the point of implementation. This can easily lead to a curmudgeonly opinion: that democracy is a waste of time, that if it is such a good thing to sit in a meeting hall trading points of order or gaining consensus until our faces turn blue just to decide on the time of an event, that it would be better if we dropped it in the name of efficiency.

The Failed Models

This desire for efficient organizing has two outgrowths, the individualist organizer and the non-profit activist group. Both seem more efficient than the messiness of democracy, and autonomous organizing often comes alongside a critique of organization which justifies it as radical. But while it may be more effective at certain kinds of advocacy, and might get a rally planned a few hours earlier than a democratic organization, these methods are no replacement for democratic organizing.

While these two tendencies seem different externally, they have the same practical effect: of hiding decision making and implementation behind mediating bodies, either the self selected groups of friends which make up many autonomous organizations, or in the managerialism of non-profits. This mediation can seem benign at first but will

steadily become worse until the organization is either defunct or locked into a bad equilibrium. The fact that decisions are ultimately made by the autonomous organizer or their group of friends, or by the upper management of the non-profit, has a deleterious effect on the way that information is shared, on the meetings held, on the way decisions are implemented.

When one is acting with peers, making a collective decision, a person is usually able to speak not just honestly but analytically. They are able to self-criticize, to criticize an action their organization took, to look at material conditions and argue that this or that action is inappropriate for this moment. Developing this sort of reflectiveness is key not only for the creation of good organizers but of good organizations, and it is a struggle in any setting to make sure there is a space for reflection. But when one is reporting to their boss, when one is speaking to a body of 'members' they have no organic relation to, the ever present temptation to keep one's analysis to oneself and engage solely in agitation grows.

Agitation--communication for the purpose of eliciting an emotional response, whether it is anger, excitement, or triumph--is an important tool and a skilled agitator is something every organization wants to have. But we need to be absolutely clear on what agitation is and is not, and it is not a suitable replacement for analysis. When an organizer is trying to rile a crowd up, that is not the time for an in depth self criticism or perhaps dispiriting analysis of the current situation. But when it is clear that you are speaking to a body of members who do not, themselves, make decisions, whose knowledge of organizing and the organization matters less than their approval of you, who you have no organic relationship to outside of being hired to manage them or being friends with the right people, then there is no inherent reason to be honest with them. There is no point in doing anything besides hyping them up.

But the replacement of good information with bad and analysis with agitation is not the only negative effect that comes from a lack of formalized democratic decision making and implementation. People are not stupid. They know when they do not have a real say. As more and more agitational meetings occur a variety of responses come to the fore: some drop out, some use the meetings for their own agitation, some seek to join whatever backroom may exist where decisions *are* made and analysis *does* happen. By the end, it's questionable if such a back room will exist. Bad information will have overtaken good, and once people are used to not having responsibility over the organizations they work in, it is hard to 'flip a switch' and add this after the fact.

Individualist organizing often begins with the idea that formally democratic organizations are inefficient, that the annoying work getting people to agree could better be used to *do the actual work*, that the constrictions of organizing collectively are autocratic. What this actually emerges from is the autocratic way we *do the work*. What often occurs in volunteer organizations is that a handful of people end up dominating parts of the work. Comrade Davenport is correct in citing this as a problem, but it is more than a technical one. It also begins to degrade democracy at the point of decision. As implementation increasingly becomes dominated by a few people, those people increasingly become overdeveloped and overburdened. This leads to an ironic problem of delegation: just as delegation becomes more necessary key members become less capable of it. With a handful of people doing a dozen tasks, personal methods become organizational methods, and processes become baroque in a way that can only be understood by the individual using them. As this solidifies the idea of democratically deciding what those few people should do becomes more and more ludicrous. Steadily the argument that we are wasting time arguing about things becomes more and more relevant, and degraded democracy at

the point of implementation becomes a degraded democracy throughout the organization.

What should be understood is that governance systems are far more than *just* the way actions are decided, they are informational systems which structure the way we interact with our work, the way we interact with each other. Because non-profits and individualist organizations have no need to justify their decisions before an open body, information is never shared in an open way, which has cascading secondary effects. Work becomes steadily more entrenched in a handful of people who do 'know' what's going on, fewer and fewer people are able to integrate. But this is not an inevitability. What is the alternative?

Outside of a high school club or church group, most people living under capitalism have not had the experience of working in an organization which is democratically operating towards social ends. The life of the average worker is one of being told what to do without being able to respond, towards ends which would likely never exist without a profit motive, without the ability to influence the situation around them let alone change what task they are working towards. Indeed, even at the other end, your average manager may have the ability to make decisions but is still unused to that decision being made collaboratively.

We are not used to thinking about the organizations we operate in. We are used, instead, to one way relationships, giving or taking orders. We are used to treating organizations as interpersonal cliques with a perhaps elected head. So when we are forced to interact with an organization, where not just us but the people around us all have a say in our decisions, we can be instinctively territorial, we can instinctively turn to cliques, we can instinctively think not of the wellbeing of *us* as a collective but just of ourselves and our projects. We can revert to the behavior I described above, agitating rather than analyzing, treating our

comrades as an external force rather than *as comrades in a shared struggle.* But it says much that the failure state of a democratic organization looks a lot like the day to day happenings of a non-profit.

The Uses of Democracy

It is the task of every socialist to build a collective mind, composed of and larger than our individual experiences, and we only build it by continually working in a democratic way. This means more than voting or reading consensus on something at the point of decision and then dropping democracy afterwards. We need to operate democratically throughout every step of the process, from conceptualization to decision-making to implementation and back. This is not done out of some bleeding heart sentiment that it would be nice to do. Because governance systems are information systems, the sharing of knowledge, skills, and experiences is the practical way by which we move from a unity of action to an ever sharper shared strategic vision. We learn from doing, but only if we allow ourselves to learn. The more democratic our processes are, the broader they are, the more people are included in that learning. When we make decisions and implement them in a democratic way, the whole group, not just a handful of staffers, organizers, or cadre, learns how to be more capable. When we work democratically we all learn about ourselves, our projects, the organizations we work in, the society we live in. The more we work democratically the more capable we are at making new decisions collectively, the more nuanced those decisions become.

We cannot put this off; we cannot wait for some moment to give us permission to flip the democracy switch. We will never be able to competently make collective decisions until we are asked to, until we try to, until we fail to. By making and learning from these decisions, we are able to better our organization's ability to make future decisions. By fighting and losing in an internal vote

and moving together regardless, we learn that our individual opinions are only important insofar as we work towards them, and strive to be better. Each time we decide on an action together and implement it together in a broad and democratic way, we teach ourselves and our comrades that our decisions matter. The dispersal of technical skills is an important aspect of this but it is the easiest of the problems that face us. Dispersing democratic skills is far more pressing.

An organization which works to build up democratic skills would include these kinds of structures, as it develops:

- A significant and open debriefing process including an analysis of our material conditions and criticism & self criticism, within group contexts and in writing.
- The creation of clear lines of communication and information exchange, publishing what can be safely and feasibly publicized, including these operational analyses and minutes.
- A focus on making as many decisions as is feasible democratically and including as many members as is feasible into the process of making decisions.
- A connected focus on making sure that implementation happens in as democratic a way as possible, that no task is the jurisdiction of a single person.
- A commitment to openly speaking about our politics in terms of our concrete goals and principles.
- An ability to connect our practical goals to the larger goals, the development of strategic and grand strategic logics within the organization.
- A commitment to be intentional when dealing with administrative tasks which often become the realm of a single person or handful of people. An understanding that our politics are embedded in *all* the work we do including administration.
- An acceptance that, on the one hand, these democratic decisions are binding, but similarly that the minority viewpoint in each vote is to be respected.

These are not just key to making a more ideologically 'good' organization. It is *practically useful* to make sure that one organizes in a democratic way. If we want to create an effective fighting organization we need to make sure that we are constantly developing our members into leaders. This means that beyond generalizing skills we have another task, "to develop and circulate capacities and skills, not so that workers meet some elite standard of privilege or prestige, but so that they are able to conduct struggle no matter the scenario or battlefield"[3]. These lessons do not come naturally, and they are not imparted by creating a Socialist Bethlehem Steel.

The society we live in is riven with hierarchy and authoritarianism. Thus, the way our society thinks about organization, about management, about organizing reflects our authoritarian society. But that reflection does not necessarily have anything to do with efficacy, and this is especially true within membership organizations. When you make an ask of a comrade, that is in no way the same as an ask of an employee whose livelihood depends on following orders. Even if you are in elected or unelected leadership, your comrades are *peers* and *equals*, and effectively working within such a framework requires experience. The ability to work with your comrades as equals. The ability to develop your analysis based on your experiences and the experiences of your comrades. The understanding that your comrades are not superiors or servants but *human beings* who must be asked as human beings to participate in the work. The perspective of the organization as not just *yours* but as the product of the combined effort of all of your comrades. *This* is what I mean when I refer to democratic skills, and is the most fundamental aspect of any art of organization worth the name. When those skills come together across an organization's membership, they form the basis for the development of a true organizational science, which requires both theoretical development and the experience of socialists across the world.

Democratic organization is not just the addition of the good word of democracy in front of the act of organizing. It is not just holding votes, or managing consensus. It is a tool by which we teach ourselves and our comrades, and becomes more effective the more broadly it is instituted. It is not a perfect tool in every situation, and I would not recommend that all organizations be run the exact way I have described. But for political organizations, democracy is the way that they turn their members into militants, the way they incorporate the perspectives of new members, the way we synthesize not just one person's experience but all our experiences. It is the way we create something that is bigger than a mailing list, that is broader than a handful of paid organizers or a clique. It is, both internally and externally, the way we create the world we are trying to build. ■

Notes

1   Amelia Davenport (2019). "Organizing For Power: Stealing Fire From the Gods". Cosmonaut. https://cosmonaut.blog/2019/11/19/organizing-for-power-stealing-fire-from-the-gods/

2   Ibid

3   Daniel Gutiérrez (2020). "Seizing the Times: Five Theses on Militant Development". Viewpoint. https://viewpointmag.com/2020/09/21/seizing-the-times-five-theses-on-militant-development/

V. Conclusion: A Base Builder Program

Jean RD Allen & Teresa Kalisz

In this dossier, we have attempted to help develop a mode of thinking where practices are considered as tools which can be used to positive or negative ends, rather than a model where practices are in and of themselves socialist or liberal. To that end we have developed a series of rubrics which can be used to consider whether our work is moving towards our goals, and whether the work we are doing gives us a sharper analysis of our goal.

A key realization presented in this dossier is that the social rupture necessary to breathe life into revolutionary politics is not limited to large-scale systemic crises. Mass outpourings follow police murders of Black people, working class people grappling with moments of economic crises, eviction waves, and community responses against ICE raids are all examples of small moments of rupture where in regular people, if for a moment, are willing to take part in militant action that would otherwise be unthinkable. These everyday ruptures provide moments for mass politicization and growth of the revolutionary project.

All About That Base spoke to an important need when it came out in 2018. Speaking to a Left which was coming out of a long period of protest-tailing sects as it's primary body, the piece created a new program which cast theoretical questions aside and called on the Left to build its own sources of institutional power outside of nonprofits and the Democratic party.

This would be done simply enough, by forming collectives committed to base-building as a project. But base-building is a form, a tactic, it is not a strategy, not a content. As DB Cooper notes in *All About That Base* all sorts of organizations utilize base building. So by insisting on this form to the exclusion of the content, we create organizations that are indistinguishable from their liberal or conservative counterparts.

All About That Base's combined lack of sectarianism along political lines and hyper-sectarianism on partisan lines needs to be reversed, as quickly as possible. Our work, from labor to mutual aid

to tenant organization to protest to reform campaigns to education, must be constantly improved and the defensive posture we have taken around organizing we have a priori decided is revolutionary stands in the way of that improvement. Combined with a view of line issues as abstract nonsense, we have created a culture just as unwelcome of democratic debate as the sect system that we tried to surpass.

This push to stop arguing, just do the work, has created a situation where the refusal to think about the work we do has supplanted the previous devotion to ideological tendencies as the biggest block to our strategic development.. And while there is a populist appeal to avoiding jargon and arcane ideological arguments, what this means in practice is a refusal to develop our comrades, or to develop our own thinking about our work. Base-Building is important, it is one part of the dialectic of working class and socialist politics. But it is incomplete, not enough on its own, and it is time to move past these formulas.

What we have proposed, in this dossier, is not a simple response to base building. It is not an argument to do labor work and electoral work instead of tenant organizing or mutual aid. It is, rather, a call for us to consistently hone our thinking about the work we do, to have our goals define our work and our work define our goals. If we are to truly develop a socialist movement which can work in every sphere of struggle, which works arm in arm with a militant worker's movement, we cannot avoid political struggle, we cannot avoid the development of an ever sharper socialist consciousness among our comrades and ourselves.

To that end, here is a summary of the dossier:

- **Get Rooted:** Communism is fundamentally a project of self liberation of the working class. In order for communists to play an active role in this struggle for liberation, we must root ourselves and our organization in working class communities and workplaces, especially among the most oppressed sectors. Without these roots, our politics and actions will be of little meaning.

- **Politicize:** The work we do needs to be rooted in the struggles of the working class, but it also has to be consistently connected to our analysis of society and our political goals. Our work must have an ongoing dialectical relationship with our analysis and goals. We must reject positions which see "bread and butter" economic demands as sufficient for the development of a revolutionary working class movement.

- **Democratize:** To commit to our work of continually expanding the communist movement, we need to do all of our work as democratically as is possible. This means making decisions in as democratic a way as can be effective, but it also means delegating tasks to prevent bureaucratization, consciously working on developing our comrades, and, occasionally, facing our comrades in a broad and open debate about our strategy.

- **Conduct Inquiries and Investigations:** For us to properly understand the changing terrain of struggles and conditions of the broader class, communists and communist organizations must engage in active social investigation and analysis in both the community and workplaces. This social investigation needs to be done in a democratic way, where the information does not merely go from researched to researcher, but is shared and used to develop the knowledge of all participants. This allows us to empower our base and allows our expanded base to become a site for future campaigns.

- **Build for Mass Action:** Our base building work should be seen as means by which we can engage in mass action and make militant action possible. Our base building efforts if successful should be able to open up new avenues and possibilities in social struggle and allow us to meaningfully engage social movements. In mobilizing our networks and organizations during social movements, we test our strength and discover 'fault lines' within the state. A successful social movement allows us to see 'politics in motion' as different forces break against each other.

- **Embrace Novel Forms of Organization Born from Struggle** Mass social movements are periods for potential experimentation in new forms social and political organization for the class. Communist should not be hostile, but critically support and engage these forms. These forms might not survive past their particular social movements, but can provide necessary space for increasing the organization and political development of the working class and represent a new stage in the advancement of working class consciousness and recomposition. Communists might also discover new more effective forms that can be applied to our organizations in these moments. ■
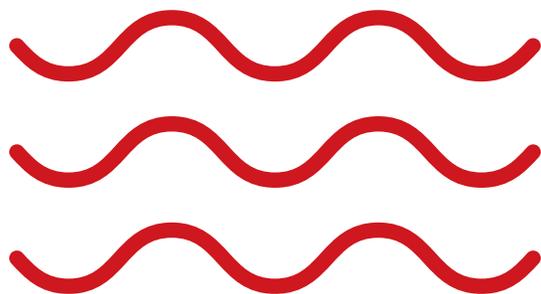
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FROM TIDE TO WAVE:

Base Building and Communist Politics