

United States Left: What happened to the International Socialist Organization

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QUESTION: What is historical materialism?

ANSWER: A defeat we're transforming into a luminous victory.

— Victor Serge, April 17, 1941 (in *Notebooks 1936-1947*, p. 72)

What happened to the International Socialist Organization (ISO) is that it self-destructed. The outgoing leadership of the outgoing organization presented this fact to the world in its statement of April 19, 2019, "Taking Our Final Steps" [1]. For many who are committed to the socialist cause, whatever criticisms or reservations they might have had regarding the ISO, this is truly a defeat. One of the purposes of what follows is to explore how and why this happened, and what it means for those who take seriously the struggle for revolutionary socialism.

For some years the ISO had existed as the largest and strongest revolutionary socialist organization in the United States. As one of its central leaders, Ahmed Shawki, emphasized more than once, the primary take-away from this indisputable fact was that revolutionary socialism was a pitifully weak force in the United States. And yet, the disappearance of this organization certainly merits more than a shrug. Despite facile critiques of the ISO generated by sectarian hostility, and despite genuine weaknesses and limitations of the organization (to be touched on later), there is no denying that the ISO demonstrated certain genuine strengths. Those strengths were a focal-point of an article I wrote in 2009, explaining why, despite some disagreements, I was about to join the ISO – "Why I'm Joining the International Socialist Organization: Intensifying the Struggle for Social Change," appearing in the online *Links: international journal of socialist renewal* [2]. There is little I would change in what I wrote then. But now, obviously, there is more that must be said.

While an active member of the ISO since 2009, I have never been part of its leadership. Nor have I been an "insider" in any of the political currents that wrote the final chapter of the ISO's existence. From mid-January to mid-April of 2019, when this final chapter was playing itself out, I was not even present in the United States.

The collapse of the ISO in April 2019 has certainly generated confusion in circles that I frequent. I have been confronted by comrades with many years' experience in the socialist struggle, beyond the borders of the United States, questioning how an organization claiming to represent some of the finest elements in the revolutionary Marxist tradition could so suddenly vanish.

A dissident majority took over their organization in the name of making it a more effective force for socialism, and then . . . quickly decided to dissolve it. This is certainly how it seemed from the outside, and how it appeared to me as I watched the process unfold during a three-month period

while working in Europe. It can be argued, however, that this conflates a much more complex set of processes. The process that contributed to the majority takeover was different from the process that culminated in the decision to dissolve.

In the aftermath, my interrogating friends have been shocked – and I must confess that I too have been startled – by what has appeared across the internet from some quite vocal adherents of this triumphant and self-dissolving majority, explaining that they have been violated terribly by pernicious leaders, devastated by insult and injury. Some have displayed what seems to these seasoned activists an almost prideful disillusionment and a sometimes flippant cynicism.

This too raises questions, in the minds of interrogating friends, about how serious a revolutionary entity this organization could have been in the first place. Seeming to fade very much into the background, aside from a rhetorical flourish here and there, is the question of what it will take – actually, today and tomorrow, in very practical and organizational terms – to bring about an effective struggle against the multiple oppressions and poisonous degradations of capitalism. Instead, the primary focus has been on exposé, indignation, anger, pain, at times flowing into a destructive and depressing trashing of former comrades and former beliefs, with contributions laced with one variety or another of “purist” conformism, followed by multiple “likes” spiced by jokes and flashes of going one better than what the last person said. Some inclined to disagree have held back – in some cases because of their own demoralization and uncertainty, in some cases because they do not want to become the focal-point of online trashing. All of this has seemed to my outside interrogators to be the opposite of serious revolutionary politics.

Yet some of their critical reaction misses key facts and aspects of what actually happened. Nor can anyone who is politically serious – at least from the revolutionary end of the socialist spectrum – afford to be dismissive over the demise of the ISO. Consider these reflections from a seasoned and critical-minded militant from Chicago, with more than five decades of activist experience in the labor and socialist movement, who had never belonged to the ISO. His internet comments (April 19, 2019), endorsed by a number of people with similar experience and background, are worth producing in full:

“In his recent interview with [prominent former ISOer] Todd Chretien, Doug Henwood remarked about the ISO that it often punched above its weight. Bracketing its political positions and its organizational short-comings — who are we to cast the first stone? — Henwood called that one right. Given the standards of the American far-left it was indeed a ‘solid’ presence.

“In Chicago the ISO’s five branches had a real periphery, and they were recruiting at a slow, but steady, rate. These recruits were almost all young, raw activists. As recently as three months ago, they routinely drew eighty to a hundred people to city wide public forums.

“Over the last eight years the ISO’s half-a-dozen CTU [Chicago Teachers Union] members have played a significant role in keeping the union involved in progressive causes from BLM [Black Lives Matter] to Fight For Fifteen. The CTU lit the fuse that eventually led to the ‘Red State Revolt’ [the recent upsurge of teachers’ strikes]. Many ISO comrades spent extended time in Oklahoma and Los Angeles, not only as reporters, but also as participants.

“Socialist Worker [3], both as a printed monthly, and as a daily on line, provided well written, and informative articles. Even when I disagreed with the conclusions, I generally learned something from them.

“The ISR [4] was an attractive quarterly with often scholarly contributions. Again, it wasn’t necessary to agree with all its conclusions, but isn’t contested opinion what Marxism demands us to

do?

"The annual Socialism Conference provided a platform for sessions beyond the ISO's membership. It began with the premise that there is a need to relate to a bigger left than its own 800 or so members. Last year's conference had around 1,200 attendees.

"Better Off Red was its weekly podcast. WeAreMany [5] contains hundreds of classes and talks ranging from the forgettable to the extraordinary.

"Haymarket Books is, perhaps, the Crown Jewel in the ISO's legacy.

"Size and apparatus aren't the only thing, they are not sufficient unto themselves in breaking out of the ghetto of the micro sect, but at the same time they are essential in carrying the hard won lessons of the past into the future. With flaws and mistakes granted, the ISO came close to playing that role. It leaves a vacuum on the American left that will be hard to fill with squabbling grouplets and contentious individuals."

Outside of its strongest center in Chicago, the ISO had branches (typically ranging between five and fifty members) and "twigs" (less than five members) throughout the country - 22 in the East, 19 in the Midwest, 10 in the South, and 10 in the West. The members were active socialists, some with significant influence beyond the ISO. For anyone who truly hopes to see a socialist future, it is essential to wrestle with the question of how and why such an organization could go out of existence. What can we learn? How can things be done better?

What follows will involve three components: (1) a summary of what I can piece together regarding what actually happened; (2) a tentative (and surely incomplete) analysis of why/how this happened; (3) notes on what those of us still committed to the revolutionary Marxist tradition might consider doing now. Analyses of what happened to the ISO have appeared online - some "connecting the dots" in a way that reinforces one or another very distinct ideological perspective, some reflecting a significant lack of political (and in some cases factual) clarity, some providing interesting ideas and possible insights but not - in my opinion - fully satisfactory. With one exception, I will not make reference to them as I try to work out my own understanding.

What Happened

First were the tremors preceding the earthquake. The organization's annual convention was coming up in March 2019, with pre-convention discussion opening in the autumn of 2018. A deep and open split soon rocked the ISO leadership body, the Steering Committee. An overwhelming majority of the Steering Committee constituted itself as an organized tendency. The once-dominant leaders of the ISO found themselves in a very small minority. A dissident upsurge took place within the membership, so that four tendencies emerged instead of two: Steering Committee Majority, Steering Committee Minority, Socialist Tide, Independence and Struggle (IS). This last tendency ended up being quite influential. It is described in an on-the-spot report from the national convention as having an orientation "not too dis-similar to the Majority position," although "it laid out actual proposals to move forward where the Majority current did not, particularly in the areas of party-building [tasks] and labor." The IS tendency also seemed suspicious of some in the Steering Committee Majority who had long supported the once-dominant leaders.

From what I could gather from the massive pre-convention discussion (with an unprecedented number of pre-convention discussion contributions filling over 40 internal bulletins), there were several very clear issues that were of concern among those who were advancing the cause of the

victorious rebellion.

- There was need for greater openness and democracy in the election of leadership bodies (eliminating the self-perpetuation of leadership that resulted from outgoing leaders regularly presenting the organization with slates of candidates for new elections to those bodies).
- There was insistence on greater transparency, collectivity, and accountability regarding the finances and functioning of the ISO.
- There was also a decisive pushback against a routinism in branch practices, and against too great a focus on campus work, that had been promulgated by the leadership at the previous convention. Many had seen this conservative approach as being out of kilter, in the midst of accumulating social struggles, with the possibilities of a mass socialist movement taking shape in the United States.

Those whose leadership was being challenged were not, it seemed to me, villains or scoundrels – I had respected them as experienced people who had devoted their lives to building up a revolutionary current in the socialist movement. While definitely not in agreement with them on all things, and aware of some of their human limitations, I still saw them as reflecting the same kinds of values and commitments that had animated me and the other members of the ISO. Yet they seemed to have nothing substantial or coherent to say: the dissenters were dishonest and disloyal, “really” driven by a desire to support the Democratic Party. But this case was by no means proved. And they put forward nothing more, from what I could see, to provide any clear sense of political direction for the ISO.

Among the triumphant dissenters, however, there was also a lack of clarity around political strategy. A minority of the majority did favor rethinking the question of socialists in the Democratic Party. There was sharp and challenging thinking regarding connections of class, race and gender. There was a proposed “focus” on a variety of different struggles that seemed to add up, in fact, to a lack of clear focus. There were assurances that the new orientation (however that might actually be worked out) would result in membership growth, though it was not clear precisely how or why this would be the case.

From a few thousand miles away, I was inclined to see what were, clearly, impending changes as going in a positive direction – though the tone of some discussion bulletin articles worried me. There seemed an undercurrent of “good guys vs. bad guys” thinking, which can become toxic even in the service of the best of causes. I feared a split could result in the loss of valuable cadres and set into motion centrifugal forces that would weaken the organization. But I hoped for the best, and felt a kinship with those pressing for changes.

The earthquake came with the national convention – what was seen by many as a very democratic convention, culminating in a diverse new leadership. There was an absolute marginalization of the once-dominant and “intransigent” element of the old leadership, which didn’t seem inclined to put forward any clear political perspective in the face of this upheaval. I was out of the country when the convention took place. The best I can do is to offer this account from one of the Pittsburgh branch leaders who attended the convention:

“Most of the proposals that stemmed from the IS [Independence and Struggle] current were adopted at convention including the perspectives on Labor concentration. A sharp yet comradely debate took place on the floor around the use of the Democratic Party and candidates like Sanders, AOC, etc. This was largely a debate between comrades supporting the IS platform and the Socialist Tide platform. The convention overwhelmingly supported the IS platform while also drawing important conclusions which were attributed to the Socialist Tide platform. And ... our new leadership body

includes representation from all three currents. ...

"In addition the proposal to allow branches to focus on real work and break from the monthly model of weekly meetings, paper sales, and study groups in addition to activist work was adopted. Branches will now have the freedom to decide what schedule makes sense for them. The weekly routines of the past were for many comrades overwhelming and easily led to burn out for many members, including myself. As a branch we will have to have some important discussions about our own routines and necessary changes to those routines so that we can free ourselves up to have a greater political impact.

We also have made some significant perspective changes particularly around the ISO's campus perspective. This model has never quite fit our branch - this of course is no surprise to many of us. It has often felt like we were putting a square peg in a round hole for our branch, which has been mostly working class. This of course is not to say students are not working-class, but has led to some inorganic ways of working for us. Our branch was not the only one to report this and the moment we find ourselves in politically means we cannot have such a narrow focus.

"And finally we accepted proposals to issue public apologies to address our shortcomings, particularly to comrades of color who have left the organization and those that have stayed to help shape our new organization. We are now in a much better position to rebuild in a more honest and transparent way, which will position us to grow and lead. We also adopted a proposal to publish a public report to summarize the debates and outcomes of our convention. ... Another significant change was adopted to become a 501c4 organization, which will make our organizations finances more transparent as well as some changes in how dues are paid."

Weeks later, I had an opportunity to speak to another comrade whose assessment of the convention was much less positive. In contrast to previous conventions, he asserted, there was a marked absence of clear reports on the current political period, and of clearly articulated proposals flowing from such analyses. Instead, he told me, there were ongoing attacks on past organizational deficiencies and on the alleged misleadership that had been predominant up until then. He felt the acrimonious atmosphere prevented the marginalized former leaders from having an opportunity to express themselves in a manner that could be heard, short-circuiting serious political discussion.

I am in no position to make judgments either about the actual atmosphere or the specifics of discussions during the national convention. I know that at the convention's conclusion there seemed, among people I trust, considerable optimism about the future of the ISO, and I hoped that optimism was well-founded, although I had an anxious feeling (based on accumulated memories from past organizational experiences) that things might not be so easy.

Then came the after-shocks. Two scandals erupted - (1) what was seen as a possible rape cover-up (from six years back), and separate from this, though in some ways related, (2) revelations of what was seen as a pattern of abusive and unacceptable behavior by a central figure of the once-dominant leadership. Both indicated, in the minds of many, a badly flawed political culture at the organization's core. Three additional facts of significance: (a) the alleged rapist, after getting off the hook, had become a charismatic and popular leader of the triumphant IS tendency; (b) someone who was accused, perhaps unfairly, of facilitating the alleged cover-up was a prominent supporter of both the Steering Committee Majority and the IS tendency; (c) the person who revealed the unacceptable behavior of the central figure mentioned in point #2 had - she herself revealed - been involved in a relationship (unknown to most of us) with that figure, but she was also a major force in the triumphant opposition.

This turn in the after-convention developments deserves strong emphasis. A very broad layer of

members – dramatically disillusioned with the long-standing leadership after a very contentious internal debate, one with destructively personalized undertones – were now deeply shaken by what seemed shocking revelations having to do with key figures to whom they had looked for leadership in making the ISO a better, more vibrant and democratic organization. This would help unleash a public discussion that gave free rein to destructively personalized overtones.

The above-described earthquake and after-shocks resulted in a wave of resignations – from angry and disgusted dissidents, from marginalized and indignant former leaders, and from many others in between. As the organization seemed to be melting away, with plummeting morale among those who were left, a decision was made by the remaining membership, through a referendum, to dissolve the organization.

Although I feel what I have written so far provides some understanding of *what* happened, what must be wrestled with is *why* it happened.

Why It Happened

The analytical framework I use in trying to make sense of what happened can be found in various writings (particularly the essays in *Unfinished Leninism* published by Haymarket Books in 2014), most recently articulated in “Reflections on Coherence and Comradeship,” published in various online sites, including *Links: international journal of socialist renewal* [6], [and *ESSF* [7]]. What follows will not rehash those reflections, but they influence my analysis.

Avoiding Sterile “Vanguardism”

My thinking is very much influenced by my experience, from 1973 to 1983, in the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and in the milieu influenced by George Breitman, Frank Lovell and other veteran Trotskyists into the early 1990s. In my discussion of the ISO, I find myself drawn to making comparisons.

In some ways, the ISO was much better, more open, seemingly more democratic. While old mentors such as Breitman and Lovell were quite open and non-dogmatic in their approach, a dominant trend in the SWP, when I entered it, was less so.

There was, despite important and significant exceptions, often great suspicion in the SWP toward non-Trotskyist sources, and substantial cultural-intellectual pressure to conform to a specific set of views. One was expected to steer clear (in writing, publishing, speaking) of crowds and publications that were not “ours” – unless we were carrying out an “intervention” that was coordinated and guided by specified leaders. This was related to the notion that the SWP was, itself, the revolutionary vanguard party destined to lead the socialist revolution. Of course, we were not big enough to do so yet, but had a self-conception as the nucleus of the future mass revolutionary party. The dynamics of capitalism and the correctness of our own political program (a program which, therefore, must be strictly safeguarded) would bring about the desired results.

For reasons that I have explained in *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*, in *Unfinished Leninism*, and elsewhere, this ran counter to the actual history and development of our presumed model – the triumphant Bolshevik organization that Lenin and other comrades fashioned in order to make the Russian Revolution of 1917. Some of the older, more seasoned comrades seemed to have a better grasp of this, but the dominant subculture within the SWP was more rigid, and the younger comrades, brought into the party thanks to the 1960s radicalization (my generation), were trained and shaped in that subculture.

The ISO was better, more open, than this. By the time I joined it (and a pre-condition for my seriously considering to join), it was no longer afflicted by the fatal self-conception that turns so many would-be Leninist organizations into sects. It was very clear that it could not be the revolutionary vanguard party or even the nucleus of the future mass revolutionary party. It recognized, as Lenin explained in *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*, that the actual vanguard could not be a small group of self-proclaimed “vanguardists.” It could only be a layer of the working class, organically developing – under the impact of capitalism and the influence of socialist ideas – a consciousness, an accumulation of activist experience, a body of knowledge and know-how, and a deepening commitment to pushing back the oppression and destructiveness of capitalism, and struggling for a better world.

This revolutionary vanguard layer of the working class could not be produced artificially within the confines of one or another “Marxist-Leninist” organization. It would necessarily emerge from a more open and long-term process, and increasing numbers from this vanguard layer would organize themselves into groups dedicated to waging more effective struggles for dignity in the here-and-now and for a future society of the free and equal. In the midst of ongoing struggles and experience, some of these groups would come together, rallying even more activist workers into a common organizational framework – and this would constitute a revolutionary party worthy of the name.

The ISO had broken from the sectarian notion that *it* was the nucleus of the revolutionary vanguard party, enabling it to recognize that, along with others, it was part of a larger process through which such a party might actually come into being.

This allowed the ISO to be stronger and healthier, in important ways, than the SWP had ever been in the years of my own membership. There were other ways in which the ISO was different from the SWP, however, that struck me as making it far weaker.

Revolutionary Continuity and Activist Experience

The SWP that I knew represented a revolutionary continuity – not simply in ideas and words and books, but in the actual life-experience of its members – that stretched back to the early decades of the twentieth century (the mass Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs and the vibrant Industrial Workers of the World of “Big Bill” Haywood), to the founding and initial decade of the Communist Party, to the very beginning of US Trotskyism, to the massive working-class battles of the 1930s and 1940s. The ideas and sensibilities, the know-how, the mode of functioning in a revolutionary organization and in broader social struggles, a familiarity with the dynamic interplay of Marxist theory and practical political work – all of this was part of a rich subculture within which we grew as political people.

The ISO that I knew lacked that amazing inter-generational enrichment. It was started in 1977, out of a factional battle and split within a relatively small socialist group, and it grew to a very large extent out of experiences on college and university campuses. Its leadership and membership were shaped in a very different way, with a far more restricted set of experiences, than was the case with the old SWP.

In the period in which I was in the SWP, its nature enabled it to play very significant roles in the actual social struggles and movements of its time. This involved an effective challenge to the war in Vietnam, a cutting-edge approach to the fight for black liberation, and an influential role in the struggle for women’s liberation. The ISO proved capable of organizing large, energetic contingents in mass marches around one or another issue, and certain of its members proved capable of playing outstanding roles in certain trade union and social movement contexts. But the practical activism in social movements that was essential for SWP branches (justifying the weekly meetings and

disciplined functioning that characterized them) was not the norm for the ISO - and this deficiency was all-too-often justified by what struck me as pseudo-revolutionary strictures against "movementism."

It is important not to distort this point, which can be done in more than one way.

First of all, we are dealing with different contexts - from the 1960s to the 1980s saw considerable activism, while the decades that followed (a formative period for the ISO) were characterized by a relative activist downturn.

Second, there were activist opportunities that ISO activists were able to engage with that provided essential experience for those involved. The radicalization within the Chicago Teachers Union, in some areas ongoing abortion clinic defense work, and the growth of Pittsburghers for Public Transit provide only some examples of consistent, sustained and highly respected ISO involvement.

The second point demonstrates, however, that the activist downturn by itself was neither complete nor capable of explaining away this particular deficiency within the ISO as a whole. It is certainly the case that ISOers would often throw themselves into activist opportunities and sometimes would almost chase after such opportunities, although sometimes then not quite knowing how to function.

Overall, and in contrast to the earlier SWP experience, the ISO was not successful in developing - as part of the internal culture of branches throughout the country - sustained and consistent activism as an essential element in the political experience and consciousness of the membership as a whole. In more than one branch there existed, as one comrade has put it, a strong tendency that involved spending "too much time 'building the organization' - that became an end in itself - which could be in tension with participation in actual struggle" (again, the presumed danger of "movementism").

The lack of genuine experience in social struggles showed in more than one way. All too many "dissident" ISOers of earlier years (including some who became dissidents only after several years of ISO education and training) seemed not to comprehend the insight from the *Communist Manifesto* that "Communists do not ... set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement." Instead, while fully engaging in the actually-existing working-class struggles (according to Marx and Engels), such Communists give voice to the need for a thoroughgoing and internationalist working-class solidarity, they emphasize the need for political independence from the capitalist class, and they point to a "line of march" of the actual struggles of the working class that must lead from resistance to oppression and violence under capitalism to an insurgent socialist democracy. To understand what this actually means, it helps to have a certain kind of practical experience all-too-often lacking in the ISO.

As a consequence, when some dissident comrades raised criticisms of ISO inadequacies, it was not around our failure to work with others in playing a substantial, ongoing, consistent role in the various struggles of our time. Instead it was that we were "adapting to reformism," failing to stake out a truly revolutionary standpoint around which to wage the struggles. For example, some earlier dissidents deemed it "adaptationist" to accept the anti-war perspective of a united front coalition instead of counterposing to it the creation of an anti-imperialist contingent. Such a contingent might attract far-left forces around a revolutionary banner, and this was seen as superior to mobilizing greater numbers of people for a "merely" anti-war action. Fortunately, the ISO majority was not inclined to veer in such an ultra-left direction.

But the lack of consistent participation by ISO members in actual struggles undermined the political development of comrades in a different way. For some members, the ISO was more or less an affinity group of those who believed socialism is a good idea, and also an educational and discussion

group for those who share such an affinity. More than this, it was an outreach organization designed to draw more such people into the socialist circle. That was the purpose of paper sales, public forums, socialism classes and even – in the minds of some – participation in political demonstrations.

Despite the involvement of ISO comrades in serious Marxist education, many were inclined to see what we were about in terms that were not seriously Marxist. For some comrades, there was an inclination to see the ISO as an association of the good people, of pure souls, standing up against the immorality and viciousness of capitalism, animated by the hope or promise that the working-class majority also has the potential for such purity – and when that majority comes closer and closer to our understanding of things, there will be increasing class struggles culminating in a socialist revolution. There was insufficient activist experience of any depth and consistency to enable some comrades to evolve very far beyond this political level.

Natural Causes – and Lessons to Be Learned

Some accounts of the ISO's death come close to attributing it to suicide brought on by unendurable disillusionment, others to outright murder cooked up by a conspiracy of scoundrels within the organization's ranks. Perhaps closer to the truth would be the assertion that the ISO died of natural causes. To die of "natural causes" refers to death from internal factors rather than death from external factors, such as trauma from an accident, or murder, or suicide. Of course, there remains the question of whether this "death by natural causes" had to take place just now – or if it might have been fruitfully delayed for a time. Nor can one be satisfied to just leave it at that: "died of natural causes." Surely there is more to be learned from this experience.

At this point, I want to make use of what struck me as one of the most thoughtful of the analyses I have seen on the ISO collapse – an essay by Saman S and Adam T (who left the ISO before the final crisis), entitled "Socialism in One Organization: Notes on the ISO Crisis," appearing in the March 21, 2019 issue of a now-defunct online journal *Failed Harvest* [8]. There are aspects of the analysis that I find unpersuasive, and points in which a rhetorical flourish (such as "socialism in one organization") get in the way of clear thinking. And yet there are elements of very clear thinking in it, in my opinion, that make it worth consulting.

The authors refer to the same strength noted above – the ISO had avoided the sterile error of seeing itself as the revolutionary vanguard party (or the nucleus of such a party); instead it saw itself, by helping to keep revolutionary Marxism intact, as an element in the future development of such a party, based as it must be in an actual radicalizing layer of the working class.

This is how they put it: "We, in effect, were keeping Marxist ideas and organization alive until the working-class could save us. At that future point, 'the upturn,' we could go 'back' into the class as fighters, armed with some memory of the historical struggle and theory." They describe a residual element of sectarian vanguardism in the ISO's self-conception: "We came, like most sects before us, to think we were leaders without an army, rather than what we really were: a group of would-be rank-and-file soldiers whose army had been defeated." They add: "Our politics were mostly good in the abstract. But in practice we adapted to the hostile territory."

Decisive is an identification of the contradiction embedded within the strength: there was a commitment to preserving the seeds of revolutionary Marxism for the future resurgence of the class struggle and a mass socialist movement; there was also a determination to protect the structure that was preserving these seeds. "When the upturn that was meant to save us finally came, with the return of strikes, with the return of socialism-as-movement," they write, "the SC Minority acted like deer in the headlights. They denied the importance of DSA [Democratic Socialists of America]. They clamped down on questions of organizational affirmative action. They pushed out anyone who

threatened the structure they had built.”

There is also an avoidance of a “good guys vs. bad guys” scenario. We are offered a more serious, historical materialist approach: “To their credit the SC Majority, and the majority of the ISO rank-and-file, rejected this abject failure of imagination. This rebellion, however, exposed the extent of the rot. It was not just the SC Minority’s failure. It was an organizational and political failure. All of us were complicit, to one degree or another. Our organization had been meant to keep the ‘seed’ of Marxism safe until the ground was more fertile. But when the time came to plant it, our seed was denatured and mutated.”

But in an already-quoted comment, Saman and Adam make a point that is worth considering more closely. “Our politics were mostly good in the abstract. But in practice we adapted to the hostile territory.” Negative “adaptions” there surely were. Yet it is significant to say that the politics of the ISO (not least of which was the revolutionary Marxism that it represented) could be “mostly good” – and I would suggest this was true not only in the abstract, but also sometimes in actuality. There were good things done, and said, and written. Some of it is durable and can feed something positive into the living socialist movement that is taking shape in our time.

What Next?

The paradox presented by Saman and Adam – that efforts to preserve “the seed of Marxism” ended with the result that “our seed was denatured and mutated” – can, they insist, be positively resolved. This is how they put it: “The good news is that half of this problem can be solved by turning into the new socialist movement and embracing it. Only in that collective struggle will our politics come back to life. The other half of the problem is more difficult to solve. It requires opening up a comradely and ongoing discussion about how revolutionaries should organize ourselves today; not just among ISO comrades, but all left-wing socialists.”

Based on the analysis developed above, however, it would be important to add and stress an additional component. There is a need not only for embracing the new socialist movement and opening up discussion on how revolutionaries should organize themselves, but also – and especially – the need to embrace, participate in, help advance, and learn from social struggles and social movements of the working class and all of the oppressed, as they push back against the violence and tyrannies of the status quo. This is not simply an add-on. It is essential. Without that, our Marxism and our revolutionary politics will be abstract, stilted, stunted, “denatured and mutated.”

How should revolutionaries organize themselves today in order to do what must be done?

We are not starting from scratch. There are residual elements from the ISO itself – formally independent entities that it helped bring into being and sustain: the Center for Economic Research and Social Change (CERSC), connected with both the immensely valuable publishing operation of Haymarket Books and the yearly Socialism conferences. Former ISO members can connect with these and various other publications and conferences. There are also other socialist organizations, some avoiding the pseudo-Leninist trap of “vanguardism” – and former ISO members are considering options and possibilities. Realities are fluid, and other structures might be developed to facilitate networking and collaboration, as we seek to transform this defeat into a luminous victory.

Those who have gone through the ISO experience – not simply that which has been painful or negative, but also the things done right – have much to contribute as we join with the growing numbers of people who are reaching for a society of the free and the equal. Learning from all of our experience, and being prepared to learn from the unfolding experiences of our own time, we will be

better able to help build a movement strong enough to push back the injustices of today, bringing to birth a future worthy of human beings.

Paul Le Blanc , May 26, 2019

Footnotes

[1] <http://socialistworker.org/2019/04/19/taking-our-final-steps>

[2] <http://links.org.au/node/1323>

[3] <http://socialistworker.org/2017/04/14/a-voice-for-socialism-for-40-years>

[4] International Socialist Review — <https://isreview.org/issue/112>

[5] <https://wearemany.org/>

[6] <http://links.org.au/paul-le-blanc-reflections-coherence-comradeship>

[7] ESSF (article 48205), [Reflections on Coherence and Comradeship - Some political thoughts on revolutionary approach, organization, and politics](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article48205):
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article48205>

[8] Available on ESSF website: ESSF (article 48293), '[United States : Socialism in one organization - Notes on the ISO crisis](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article48293)':
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