

United States : Socialism in one organization - Notes on the ISO crisis

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The following are very preliminary notes regarding the crisis in our former group, the International Socialist Organization. This short document does not claim infallibility. Nor does it examine in detail the specific events that led to this immediate crisis. That task is being taken up admirably by survivors, and current and former ISO members, who have exposed some of the worst abuses. Instead it begins to ask : why ? Why did an organization with, on paper, a dedication to democracy and "socialism from below" go so wrong ? What we describe, of course, are tendencies. There were always exceptions. There was always good work done alongside the bad. But, as demonstrated by this crisis, the "bad" tendencies won out in the end. Moreover, this document does not weigh in directly on the poverty of the old ISO SC's understanding of socialist feminism and queer theory. Lastly, this will be an ongoing discussion and this is not the last nor the best word on the subject. We look forward to hearing from all our comrades as we move forward. - Saman S. and Adam T.

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Since 2013 our position has been, more or less, that the undemocratic aspects of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), its misunderstanding of liberalism, and its sectarian attitude to other leftists, were the main impediment to it playing a productive role as part of the left-wing of the new socialist movement. We believed that these problems were the result of a misunderstanding of Leninism and a misunderstanding of the political moment. That, were the ISO to break with these political mistakes, try to forge alliances with other revolutionary socialists, and realize that we needed to build a new socialist movement from the ground up, it could salvage the ideas of "socialism from below" and project them among a new generation of socialists.

But that moment is over - if it ever existed. There was a window in 2013-2014, after the implosion of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), to come clean. To say, we made mistakes, and open things up inside and outside the organization. Instead the old ISO Steering Committee (SC) doubled down. While publicly denouncing the SWP's rape cover-up they engaged in their own. Instead of opening up the organization, the old leadership battened down the hatches.

It has now become clearer to us that these were not mere mistakes but the outcomes of a set of (mostly but not entirely unstated) politics. The failures of the ISO flowed from a particular kind of sect-leninism (that has little to do with Lenin or the Bolsheviks pre-1918). Therefore, in hindsight, it may have even been structurally and ideologically impossible for the old ISO leadership to make the turn made available to them in 2013 - 2014. To be sure individual personalities played their role, but it would stretch credulity to think that the SC Minority joined the socialist movement with the goal of being what they eventually became. Although there can be no doubt of their ultimate betrayals, something more “political” is at work.

At the core of the *subjective* problem, we think, was a mutually reinforcing dyad of “party theory” and the economics of the organization. Related to these two subjective problems, in the case of the ISO, was the *objective* reality that the group and its key organizers came of age politically from the late 1970s through the early 2000s, in a period of class defeat, the rise of neoliberalism, and when socialism was all but obliterated in working-class consciousness. This meant that *any* socialist organizing in the U.S., at that time, would necessarily be, mostly, a matter of propaganda and education, and be colored by the overall capitalist ethos of the period.

And thus the project of ISO (like that of others in the IS tendency) became one of survival. Survival, until a shift in balance of class forces, would make a return from the cocoon of the organizational safety, possible. This is ironically not that different from the failed attempt of the Soviet regime in the 1920s to hold out until a shift in balance of international class forces (revolution in Europe) would come to their aid.

THE SO-CALLED THEORY OF THE PARTY

From Trotsky’s death onward, a version of Leninism was invented, with different inflections by various Trotskyist tendencies, that mixed the experiences of the early Comintern with certain works by Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci and Lukács (that probably also adopted a certain symmetry with their larger Communist Party competitors). What was stitched together as the “Leninist Party,” however, reified the work of the aforementioned authors and comrades. A phantasmagorical being was invented : the revolutionary party as abstract ideal.

This shifted the goal of sect-Marxism from the revolutionary transformation of society to the creation of an *organization* that could carry out the revolutionary transformation. This is an important distinction. As Trotsky noted, while Marxists reject the pacifist equivalency of ends and means, neither do we embrace the cynical idea that ends justify means. Instead, there is a dialectic between the two.

The sect ideal turns one of the *possible tools* of revolution into *the goal* of socialist organizing. Once this occurs what is best for the organization *must* begin to outweigh what is best for the class, the exploited and oppressed, when and if they come into conflict. After all, what is the grievance of one worker, one comrade, one woman, one oppressed person, in the face of the ultimate emancipation ? This cynical approach to the class struggle is clearly expressed in Tony Cliff’s *Building the Party (Lenin Vol. 1)*. By introducing this contradiction between elemental solidarity and organization the door was opened to further devolutions.

AN ECONOMICS OF SOCIALIST PERSONS

As long as the socialist movement remained small, and the stakes largely abstract, the ISO could

“thrive.” The basis of this functioning had its own particular “economics.” To be clear, it was not all bad. The ISO was, in effect, a school of Marxism (although one that grew increasingly problematic over time), at a time when the world was not helping our cause (more on this below). And, of course, there were struggles where comrades did important work. There are people alive today who would not be without the Campaign to End the Death Penalty (CEDP). But the ISO leadership increasingly operated in a proprietary manner, much like a small business ; albeit a business that tried to meet and manage the revolutionary aspirations of (mostly) young socialists in the context of triumphant capital.

These two things, the scholastic and petit-bourgeois, were tied together. The ISO, at its core, depended on being the main space for Marxist politics among a layer of young socialists. As the largest far-left organization in the U.S. from the late 1990s through the mid 2010s, it could play this role. It was one in which the membership was seen as mostly passive recipients of the SC’s wisdom ; and workers beyond the organization seen in similar terms. “The sectarian looks upon life,” Trotsky writes, “as a great school with himself as a teacher there.”

In a hostile capitalist environment, the socialist-teacher must, of course, maintain control of the classroom and the curricula. So, when members got out of line they were cajoled with carrots (book deals, articles to write, speaking at Socialism, staff jobs) and sticks (expulsion, etc.). Over time this became increasingly abusive. Meanwhile, the ISO core leadership’s politics became more abstract. Advances in left consciousness and theory (around women’s liberation, queer theory, Black liberation) were suspect. Challenges to the “school” (other socialist traditions for example) had to be carefully managed by the center. Those who had been expelled or dropped out had to be isolated from the student body.

As long as the ISO remained an “island of socialism” in a hostile world, *this economics of socialist persons* could be maintained. With a monopoly on “socialism,” there were always enough new people to take the place of last year’s apostates. There were just enough carrots to keep the cadre from all rebelling at the same time. There was just enough “good work” being done to allow the organizers to sleep at night.

“PERSPECTIVES” AND THE FAILED HARVEST OF 2019

To keep up the frenetic pace of activity needed for sect organizing, to ensure the annual harvest of young socialists, a “perspective” was developed that argued, in one way or another (for twenty-some years), that the ISO was on the verge of an upsurge of struggle. To be sure, there were qualifications and retreats on this “perspective” (these were born of the overall vacillation of the leadership in response to external events). But, generally speaking, the leadership told the members for two decades that there was a “radicalization” going on that would soon lead to mass struggles on the scale of the 1930s or 1960s. It never materialized. And, paradoxically, as long as that messianic moment never came the organization could largely move “forward.”

But then messianic moments started to come. In succession, the financial crisis, Occupy, The Tea Party, Black Lives Matter, Socialist Alternative’s (SA) electoral victory in Seattle, the Bernie Sanders campaign, the Trump election, actual Nazis, antifa, the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the formation of new socialist associations and groups like the Marxist Center, the generalization of socialism as a political marker for an entire generation, #metoo, the largest strike year in the U.S. since the 1980s, the existential threat of climate change, incels, Leftbook, far-right terrorism, and on and on. In just a few years, socialism ceased to be an abstraction and became an actual movement and milieu. Fascism became an increasingly present threat. Immiseration became

a generational trait. The stakes became far more immediate. Abstraction wasn't good enough anymore.

This intrusion of the real world short-circuited the ISO's economy of socialist persons. With the new socialist movement, the annual harvest was threatened - why join the ISO and not the left of DSA, SA or the Marxist Center? The carrots were no longer as useful in controlling the existing membership; and the sticks became less threatening. After all, the biggest threat the SC had was expulsion from the socialist movement. As of 2016, and arguably 2014, the ISO SC could no longer pretend to wield that power. Perhaps most importantly, with the advancement of the broader socialist milieu, the political weakness of the ISO SC was increasingly exposed.

When socialism-as-movement returned, as Marx promised us it would, the worst members of the old SC lashed out at the membership and then retreated into their suburban houses. Other members of the national leadership turned on them (out of political and personal necessity), the floodgates opened, and the rot was exposed.

THE LAZIEST RESIGNATION LETTER IN TROT HISTORY

This explains the lazy, resigned and perfunctory character of the SC Minority's resignation letter. This is not the letter of a group of people who have lost a political argument, right or wrong. This is not the letter of serious Marxists who are putting their thoughts on the record to be judged by future comrades. This is not even the letter of deluded sectarian blowhards who want to be remembered in the great pantheon of working-class heroes. This is the letter of a group of bosses to their employees and customers blaming *them* for their business going bankrupt. What matters here is what caused that bankruptcy. It was the rebirth of the socialist movement in conflict with a flawed sectarian model in the group's organizational DNA.

SOCIALISM IN ONE ORGANIZATION

"It is a lesson, because it is the absolute truth that without a German revolution we are doomed—perhaps not in Petrograd, not in Moscow, but in Vladivostok, in more remote places to which perhaps we shall have to retreat, and the distance to which is perhaps greater than the distance from Petrograd to Moscow. At all events, under all conceivable circumstances, if the German revolution does not come, we are doomed." (Lenin, "Extraordinary Seventh Congress of the R.C.P. [B]," [March 6-8, 1918]).

The ISO's two main parent organizations, the US International Socialists (IS - later Solidarity-US) and the UK SWP, actually experienced and participated in the mass struggles in the 1960s and 1970s.

Tony Cliff's major contribution to our movement, good and bad, was a strategy for the SWP to survive the "downturn" of class struggle during the 1980s. This retreat came with a price. The 1960s and 1970s SWP (and its predecessor the UK IS) was an intellectually vibrant organization rooted in student and labor struggles. By the time of its collapse it was empty and sclerotic. In the 2000s, prior to the SWP's collapse, Neil Davidson asked what had happened to his organization. His answer was, in large part, the 1980s. The sequestering of the organization from the struggle, its separation from the *working-class*, had a distorting effect on the SWP over time. The leadership increasingly distrusted its membership, and by extension the development of class-consciousness outside the organization (see Neil Davidson, "Leadership, Membership and Democracy in the Revolutionary

Party," SWP Internal Bulletin [December 17, 2008]).

Unlike the British SWP the American IS/Solidarity refused to retreat from the struggle. But they too paid the price of the 1980s reaction, albeit in a different form. Choosing to remain with the movement, to remain with the class, Solidarity became a bruised and damaged organization left over when the tide receded. This is not to disparage good comrades in Solidarity or the important work of *Labor Notes*, etc. No one on the left survived the 1980s without incredible damage one way or the other. It is to show there were no truly good choices for revolutionary socialists in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Unlike the IS/Solidarity and the SWP, the ISO was only a child of the "downturn." Founded in the late 1970s the ISO only knew reaction and besiegement for most of its life. In that besiegement the promise of the future upturn, and then of a radicalizing minority plus the future upturn, allowed comrades to continue organizing in the harshest of political circumstances. The future upturn became the ISO's (and UK SWP's) "German revolution." 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.

But, as with our Bolshevik ancestors, over time, necessity was turned into virtue. 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. Our politics were mostly good in the abstract. But in practice we adapted to the hostile territory. Why did so many good people, so many dedicated revolutionaries, turn on their fellow comrades ? One can ask this about the Soviet purges as well as the increasingly abusive behavior of the ISO. It is mostly a matter of broader material and political conditions. This is not to say individual character is not important, but it is being that determines consciousness, not consciousness that determines being.

The Bolsheviks flipped from waiting for revolution to save them to fearing revolution. With the decimation of the working-class, Soviet democracy had failed, and the party substituted itself for the class. Throughout the 1920s the bureaucratic counter-revolution slouched toward Bethlehem until it was fully born in the Five Year Plans and the purges. Working-class revolution outside of the USSR would have exposed the truth ; most importantly to the newly reconstituted, and increasingly exploited, Soviet working-class. Stalin's "theory" of "Socialism in One Country" was born. The Comintern, set up to spread revolution, was infamously used to sabotage it, in Spain, in China, and so on.

A similar process occurred in the ISO. When the upturn that was meant to save us finally came, with the return of strikes, with the return of socialism-as-movement, the SC Minority acted like deer in the headlights. They denied the importance of DSA. They clamped down on questions of organizational affirmative action. They pushed out anyone who threatened the structure they had built. The SC Minority's answer to an actual upturn, was, in effect, "socialism in one organization." 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.

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.

SOLIDARITY FIRST, ORGANIZATION SECOND

The above ideas are not fully thought out. And we freely admit we could easily be wrong (in small or large part). Right or wrong, however, in our opinion, the far left should embrace the comrades in the ISO who are exposing abuse, the reformers who unearthed the rot, and those who took control of the group, creating a multi-racial and diverse leadership, only to have the crimes of the old SC undermine all their work. Now is not the time for sectarian gloating.

We should also begin, across the left, an open, comradely, and materialist discussion about why the sect-form has failed. This is important for all of us - not just the current and former members of such organizations. This is because the need for revolutionary organization remains. SYRIZA's betrayal of the Greek working-class should remind us that the question of revolutionary organization cannot, ultimately, be avoided. Eventually *that moment* comes too. But we need to find a better path toward revolutionary organization. We need to begin that discussion, with both humility and seriousness, based on our actual human material, the current political dynamics, the current state of struggle, etc.

This means putting socialist revolution, the socialist movement, and the principle of social solidarity that animates each, back at the center of our work ; and abandoning an abstracted and sectarian version of the so-called "revolutionary party."

WAS IT ALL IN VAIN ?

We, the current and former members of the ISO, have lost a great deal in this organizational crisis and failure. We joined the ISO in large part because of a dual commitment - to the absolute centrality of self-emancipation from below (rather than emancipation from above), *and* a commitment to achieve that emancipation by any means necessary. We have not lost our goal of socialist revolution. We have lost a damaged tool ; a tool that was no longer suitable to our project. We have not lost ourselves. We are hundreds or more revolutionary Marxists in the belly of the beast. We can and should find new tools.

There is, after taking care of ourselves and our loved ones, nothing stopping us from joining the tens of thousands of other organized socialists in the new movement, building grassroots struggles and projecting socialist politics to the class. This may mean organizing independent socialist political campaigns, economic struggles (like the fight for rent control), workplace struggles (the teachers' strikes), struggles against oppression (like that facing our immigrant siblings, people of color and our trans comrades), antifascist organizing, anti-imperialism, theoretical struggles, and so on. A great benefit of not having to check with the "center" is that we can now pick those tasks that seem most important to us politically, and those tasks we know we are best suited for.

And *within* all that, we can still strengthen the the left-wing of the movement, laying the groundwork for what is to come. We may do this in a new formation launched by the current and former members of the ISO, inside the left-wing of DSA, in other organizations, or some combination of these. Regardless, we would do this not as leaders abstracted from struggle, but as equals within it, always putting social solidarity first, while trying to rebuild and salvage a living revolutionary socialism ; with humility and painfully earned wisdom.

Contact us at : p70volkl yahoo.com

P.-S.

- Failed Harvest. March 21, 2019 :
<https://failedharvest.com/blog/socialism1.org>
- This blog was started by former members of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) to share thoughts about the current crisis and the way forward.