



ORGANIZING, LEADERSHIP, STRATEGY, & UNITY

CONCLUSIONS & REFLECTIONS FROM THE NEW YORK STUDY GROUP

WHO ARE WE?

We are a small group of NYC activist and organizers based in diverse communities and organizations. Most of us are people of color in our 30s, with a healthy dose of white folks and 40 somethings, and have been active as organizers and activists for over a decade. Many of us cut our political teeth in the NYC of the '90s, aka, the best of the Guiliani years. We largely come from the "social movement left," i.e., self identified leftists within social movements, often working within community based, non-profit organizations, without deep experience with left organizations or parties. We're a diverse group, not ideologically fixed-- some influenced by Marxism, some by anarchism, many

agnostic or still figuring it out. However, we do share many core beliefs.

We believe that capitalism cannot be reformed. We believe in a socialist alternative to capitalism, even if there aren't any perfect models or precedents. We know that this alternative cannot be ushered in gently or politely; capitalism will not exit stage left without a fight.

We came together because many of us had known each other for a while-- marching, yelling, protesting, organizing, struggling, scheming together-- and recognized that our efforts were limited by a lack of coordination, planning, and organization. In an early meeting, one of us reflected, "We've been busting our asses for at least 10 years now. And if you had said to me in 1996 that we'd all put our everything we have into this work for decade and this is where NYC would be as a result, I would have shook my head. I don't want to look back in 10 years from now and shake my head." This shared sentiment brought us together.

WHERE ARE WE?

In 2006, a handful of us attended a discussion featuring Stanley Aronowitz and Bill Fletcher at the Brecht Forum on the need for a left party. They argued for the creation of an effective revolutionary left organization that could develop and disseminate revolutionary left ideas and strategically coordinate the work of people like ourselves across different sectors and arenas of struggle. Sounded good to us. So we outreached to some trusted comrades and formed a study group to develop some shared analysis of left parties and organizations. We started by looking backwards to acknowledge our place in a broader arc of left history. We asked, where are we now; where were we before; and how have we been doing? (curriculum attached)

We came together to create a space of reflection that we were lacking in our day-to-day work. We studied key questions in the history of revolutionary left organizations with the goal of advancing our common understanding and deepening our capacities to contribute to the reemergence of strong mass movements and revolutionary left organization in the United States. Through our study we grappled with the historic contradiction that every revolutionary movement in the 20th century faced: the need for effective revolutionary leadership and for the broadest possible democratic participation. We don't

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claim to have made any theoretical breakthroughs on this question, but we know that we can't let it paralyze us. We know that we need both revolutionary leadership and deep democracy. We can only develop the resolution through the concrete practice of building a revolutionary movement, a practice that must be fundamentally democratic and bottom-up.

By the end of our study process, we came to the assessment that we need a strong revolutionary socialist organization or party that can bring together the social movement left with the membership of already existing revolutionary left organizations. In addition to a long history of state repression, we believe existing left organizations are limited in their effectiveness because of some key factors: 1. younger radicals' perception of these organizations as sectarian and weighed down with historical baggage, 2. membership perceived to be too white, too old, too male, and too straight, and 3. not connected or relevant enough to the social movement left. We believe the social movement left is the site of some of the most rooted and dynamic struggles, however, it is limited in its effectiveness for all the reasons already mentioned, including lack of scope/scale, strategic coherence, and disconnection to revolutionary left organizations.

We do not see ourselves as the nucleus of the so-badly-needed strong revolutionary socialist organization, but we are eager to help lay the groundwork for it to emerge. We believe that the best way to promote that process is to build transitional left projects that will promote closer relationships between left organizers and activists through common practice and political dialogue. With these objectives in mind we identified four priorities that will inform our common work in the coming period.

WHERE SHOULD WE GO?

1. Support Organizing

We believe that organizing that builds social movements is the most fundamental work that revolutionaries can be engaged in today. Any successful revolution must be based on a mass movement of oppressed people-- the poor, the working class, racially and nationally oppressed peoples, women, students,

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youth, queer folk, the disabled, prisoners, soldiers and others-- and more revolutionaries need to be engaged in this work. However, there are serious challenges that face those who are engaged in organizing. We are often isolated into our different organizations and too overwhelmed with the day-to-day work to develop the larger visions and strategies we need to take the movement to a higher level. We don't have spaces where we can reflect,

discuss challenges, and share the models and solutions we are testing. We struggle, too often in isolation, to figure out how to combine effective reform fights with laying the groundwork for a revolutionary movement. We believe that it is important to create spaces where left organizers can come together for mutual reflection and strategic thinking; this will help to build the strength and clarity of the social movement left and provide a stronger foundation for the left as a whole.

2. Expand Revolutionary Leadership

The most effective way to guarantee the fullest democratic participation in the revolutionary process is to promote the broadest possible development of revolutionary leadership. We need organizers and activists who are rooted in the broadest array of oppressed communities who can critically analyze political events as they unfold, develop strong, responsive left strategies, and possess the practical skills to carry them out. Although individual leaders can come from any sector of society, it is most important for us to support the development of revolutionary leadership of oppressed people, particularly working class people of color. The middle-class nature of the self-identified revolutionary left needs to be transformed and one way is to expand revolutionary leadership. To accomplish this work, we have to build educational programs and institutions that can develop the capacity of oppressed people to analyze society, develop left strategies and lead the broader movement.

3. Develop Revolutionary Theory, Politics, and Strategy

We need to continuously develop and refine a systematic understanding of the world we live in and what it will take to bring about the revolutionary transformation of society. Capitalism is a dynamic system that has continuously evolved in the face of powerful social movements that have sought to overthrow it. Our theory has to keep pace with capitalism and be equally dynamic. There are no simple answers to the problems of making socialist revolution in the United States in the 21st century. Yet the deep anti-intellectualism of U.S. culture has damaged radical social movements by discouraging the development of comprehensive, complex, and yet compelling ideas. While we can't throw away the lessons from the past century of revolutionary movements, we have to recognize that every revolution is new. Every new revolutionary movement has to develop new theory, politics and strategy that are relevant to its time, place and condition.¹ Near the top of our “analysis to be developed list” is:

1. We are grateful to the thinking of the Labor/Community Strategy Center in this area.

a contemporary class analysis of US imperialism that incorporates race, gender and nationality; the natural environment and ecological crisis; and a strategy of how to achieve revolutionary change in advanced capitalist societies (just to name some of the easier ones). We need spaces to develop revolutionary theory and strategy, and forums to discuss, debate, and coordinate their implementation.

4. Build Left Unity

None of the existing organizations or tendencies of the left, on their own, can accomplish the tasks described above, let alone build an effective and powerful revolutionary left organization for the 21st century. In fact, none of the existing socialist, communist or other revolutionary left organizations, nor any of the forms developed by the social movement left are the obvious nucleus around which such an organization might be built, in our humble opinion. The constitution of such an organization depends on three things in this next period: 1. the expansion and evolution of social movements, 2. the emergence of new left forces from social movements, and 3. the unification of existing forces. These are not distinct processes. Although we believe that the emergence of these new forces from the social movements will be the primary driver in refounding the revolutionary left, unification and coordination will be critical to this project.² The emergence of new leadership and forces can be a prod for the unification of existing forces and vice versa.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

Two plus years into a study group process, these are the four priorities we've identified. We seek to promote revolutionary left unity through the creation of joint projects and other initiatives that develop coordinated and effective organizing, dynamic theory and strategy, and leadership training between diverse tendencies, traditions, and organizations. Our first attempt is our participation in the 2008 Revolutionary Work in Our Times

summer school. After that, we will be initiating a series of political dialogues for organizers and activists in New York City to learn from one another and engage in strategic dialogue about organizing and movement building as revolutionaries.

Our times are urgent. US hegemony and the neoliberal model are experiencing a deepening global crisis. Our communities face huge challenges, but we also have incredible opportunities. We believe a strong left can re-emerge after decades of conservative onslaught. If we can get more coordinated and strategic, things can look radically different ten years from now. Together we can build another and better world.

NEW YORK STUDY GROUP CURRICULUM

SESSION 1: The Leninist Party Model

Core Readings:

What is to be Done (Chapters 2 – 4), V.I. Lenin

Lenin and the Russian Revolution, Antonella Salomoni

Supplemental Reading:

Where is the Party? Max Elbaum

Lenin for Beginners

SESSION 2: Gramsci and Mao

Gramsci:

“Socialism and Marxism” and “ Factory Councils and Socialist Democracy” from *The Antonio Gramsci Reader* edited by David Forgacs

“The Lyon Theses,” *The Italian Situation and the Tasks of the Italian Communist Party* (Lyons, January 1926)

“Introduction” and “Glossary” from *The Antonio Gramsci Reader* by David Forgacs

Introduction to Gramsci, *New Left Review*

“Gramsci and the State” from *The State and Political Theory* by Martin Carnoy

Mao Tse-Tung:

Combat Liberalism (September 7, 1937)

The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War (October 1938)

Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership (June 1, 1943)

Current Problems of Tactics in the Anti-Japanese United Front (March 11, 1940)

“The Chinese Revolution” from *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements* from James DeFronzo

“The Making of the Chinese Revolution” and “Maoism in Power,” from *Marxism After Marx* by David MacLellan

SESSION 3: Communist Party in the 1930s

Historical Overview: The “Popular Front” in the US: The Only Option? by Charlie Post

Union Organizing: Chapter 1: The Congress of Industrial Organizations: Left Right and Center & Chapter 2: Who Gets the Bird? from *Left Out: Reds and America’s Industrial Unions* by Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin

Community Organizing: The Unemployed Councils: Radical Neighborhood Organizing, 1929 – 1946 from **Let The People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America** by Robert Fisher

Work in the Black Community: “Afric’s Sons with Banner Red:” African American Communists and the Politics of Culture, 1919 – 1934 from *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* by Robin Kelley.

SESSION 4: Contemporary International Models

Theoretical Overview: *Forging a Union of the Party Left and the Social Left*, Marta Harnecker

Overview of Latin America: *The Center Left, Nationalism and Socialism*, Claudio Katz

Case Study 1: Brazil: *The New and the Old in Brazil’s PT*, by Gianpaolo Baiocchi & Sofia Checa; *The Long March of Brazil’s Labor Party*, Michael Lowy; *The Consolidation of the new PT*, Palavra Cruzada

Case Study 2: Philippines: *The People's Democratic Revolution is the only Solution to the Fundamental Problems of the Filipino People*, from the Philippines Society & Revolution; *Critique of the Politico-Military Strategy*, Sonny Melenacio and Reihana Mohideen

SESSION 5: The U.S. Left Today

Core Readings:

"Three Core Domains of Struggle and Alternative," Stanley Aronowitz, from *Left Turn: Forging a New Political Future*, Paradigm: 2006

"The Shape of Practice," Stanley Aronowitz, from *Left Turn: Forging a New Political Future*, Paradigm: 2006

"What is Solidarity and Where did It Come From?," Solidarity

"Unity Statement on National Oppression, National Liberation, and Socialist Revolution," Freedom Road Socialist Organization

Program of the League of Revolutionaries for a New America

Excerpt from the CPUSA Program: "*The Working Class, Democratic Struggles and Forces for Progress*"

"*Bring the Ruckus*," Ruckus Collective

Supplementary Readings:

"*Which Way is Left*," FRSO

"*Left Refoundation and Party Building*," Freedom Road Organization, 2000

"*Forging a Union of the Party Left and the Social Left*," Marta Hanecker, 2001

"Lessons from the New Communist Movement," from Max Elbaum's *Revolution in the Air*, 2002

Socialist Organization Today, Solidarity 2006

SESSION 6: The National Social Movement Today

Class Analysis Readings:

Posing the Problem: The Agenda of Class Analysis, Erik Olin Wright

Six Points on Class, by Michael Zweig

Combahee River Collective Statement

The City and the Grassroots, Manuel Castells

Reflection Questions for Writing on the State of Social Movement

What is the state of the work in the sector of the social movement in which you do your primary work? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

What work is needed to build your sector to a mass scale?

What is needed to set a clear left pole in your sector?

What is the state of the broader social movement? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

Why is the work in that state? What are the sources of the strengths and the limitations?

Reflection Questions for Writing on Vision for Liberation Movement

What do you think a successful liberation movement would look like in this country? How big would it be?

What will be the movement's primary issues / struggles?

What social groups will be the main motive forces in the liberation movement?

What social groups will be the main targets of the struggle?

What social groups will be middle forces?

What are the primary obstacles to a successful liberation movement in this country?

What work is most needed to advance the development of the social movement broadly?

What work is most needed to set a clear left pole in the social movement?

What work is most needed to build the left?

SESSION 7: The Movement in NYC Today & What is to be Done?

Reflection Questions for Writing on Movement-Building

Based on your knowledge of the history of social movements and based on our readings, what would a successful liberation movement in the United States look like (e.g. Scale, Scope, Major Issues, Base, Methods of struggle)?

If you could lay out, in a “strategic plan,” the key stages for the development and ultimate victory of a liberation movement in the US, what would the top 5-10 key stages be?

What would the driving organizations / party look like? (e.g. Strategic role, form, relationship with movements, membership base / demographics, basis of political unity and so on)

- in the long run?

- in the current moment here in New York City?

What are the three most central needs right now in terms of building the movement and/or building the left, in New York City and/or nationally? Why?

***Note:** If you are considering using this reading guide for your own study group, you should know that there are some changes that we would make if we were doing it over again. You should see this guide as a source for information and ideas rather than as a finished model.*