

EC DISCUSSION DOCUMENT
1976 CONVENTION

THE IS IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE

In July 1975, the IS adopted a perspective for transforming our organization and deepening our position in the class struggle. Key to our transformation into a genuine working class revolutionary organization was our perspective for industrial and trade union action. This perspective pointed to the two and a half year period in which all of the major unions' contracts would be up for renewal. Beginning with postal in the summer of 1975, running through trucking, rubber, electrical and auto in 1976, and telephone, steel, and coal mining in 1977, this would be the first contract round following the depression of 1974-75.

With the crisis of capitalism sharper than at any time since the 1930's, we saw that the 1975-77 contract round would be a hard-fought one on both sides. Faced with the need to re-coup its losses, expand its capital base, and postpone the next, more terrible depression, the capitalist class would be on the offensive. The working class, our class, would feel the twin pinch of mass unemployment and declining real wages. Added to these, the newest phase of the employers' offensive would mean still more pressure on working conditions.

Standing between these forces, the labor bureaucracy was to be battered from both sides. Tied to its old methods of class collaboration, it could not envision a real fight with the ever-more aggressive employers. But, at the same time, these mildewed labor leaders felt more and more pressure from the rank and file. In this situation, we said that the labor leadership would be unable to put up a real fight. That, while the bosses might be willing to make fools of them, these labor leaders were too tied to their old methods to rise to the occasion. This, we pointed out, left a vacuum--a vacuum of leadership into which revolutionaries could rush.

Revolutionaries could fill this vacuum by providing leadership around a clear agitational program focussed on contract demands. We said that wherever revolutionaries had any roots, even weak ones, we could lead in the formation of serious contract fights. We also saw that these contract fights could lay the basis for on-going rank and file movements in the major unions.

Agitational intervention in the contract round, on a program in the interests of the vast majority of workers, was also the key to building a real revolutionary workers' organization. Through its agitation, the IS worker militants and leaders could prove that it was, in fact, revolutionaries that offered the clearest way to fight the employers' offensive today. Through a combination of agitation and propaganda--for example, through Workers' Power--we would be able to win a small section of workers active in these contract fights and on-going oppositions to our broader socialist perspective.

Our perspective for building both the rank and file movement and the revolutionary workers' organization was no crude "rip-off" or "get-rich-quick" scheme. It was a serious strategy that combined two elements necessary for a successful workers' revolution: the mass movement and the revolutionary organization. We said that we could become leaders, win other worker leaders and activists to our ideas, train and win many inexperienced workers to become leaders. In this way, a new leadership could be trained to replace the moribund class collaborationists who have misled the working class for years. To repeat, this perspective would take two and a half years in all.

We have completed the first year of this perspective and must now assess our progress.

In terms of the class struggle itself and our predictions, we can say that the ideas we put forth last year were mainly correct. The employers' offensive, in all aspects, has become a day-to-day reality for most workers. Public employees are facing open union-busting and wage-cutting tactics of a kind not seen since the 1920's and 30's. In New York, the public employees' unions are in complete route, while in other cities, like San Francisco, they have begun their retreat. The US Postal Service has accelerated its incredible speed-up drive among clerks, carriers and handlers alike. The postal contract, the first in the 1975-77 contract round, was a defeat for the rank and file. True to form, the leaders, even the supposedly militant secondary leaders like Sombretto, were incapable of mounting a real fight. For their part the ranks, not yet organized and by and large leaderless at that time, were unable to turn the situation around.

The IS attempted to provide that rank and file with a program and some tactical ideas. While our literature and ideas were well received, they were in fact too little and too late. Without even a small core of leaders inside the post office, our attempted outside intervention was unable to change the course of events at that time. That intervention, however, did help lay the basis for a growing rank and file movement around the paper, Postal Worker, which now distributes 4,000 copies in some 15 cities.

The employers' offensive has grown in the private sector of the economy as well. In the coal industry, a fierce attack by the employers on the traditional power of the rank and file was able to crush the reform leadership of Arnold Miller. Caught between employer aggressiveness and traditional rank and file militancy, Miller was unable to carry out his middle-of-the-road reform plans. Indeed, the crustiest old bureaucracies have come under enormous strain as a result of the employers' offensive and the sentiment of the rank and file for resistance to it. Succession crises have broken out to one degree or another in the auto and steel workers unions. In the teamsters union, a rumored alliance of some of the mightiest regional barons appears to have taken control away from Fitzsimmons--who demonstrated that he could control neither employers nor teamsters.

Rank and file sentiment and pressure has forced the leadership of some of these unions to take a more militant posture than usual. Fitzsimmons was forced to call the first national freight strike as a result of pressure from the TDC. Rubber Workers' President Peter Bommarito was forced to call a serious strike against the big four rubber companies by a combination of pressure from the right-wing International Society of Skilled Trades and from production workers. In the UPS contract fights, the teamster barons in charge, particularly Roy Williams, were forced to take an even more militant stand than Fitz. Under heavy pressure from UPSurge, which unquestionably represented the majority opinion among UPS workers, these bureaucrats moved to adopt the entire UPSurge program and to call a two-week strike. In the end, of course, no movement as young and untested as UPSurge or TDC could force these class traitors to abandon their age-old preference for even the nastiest of employers--and UPS is one of the nastiest.

The importance of the early contracts, in particular freight, are that they will set the pattern for future settlements and for future aspirations by workers in other industries. From this point of view, the results so far are inconclusive. That is, TDC was not strong enough to force the teamster bureaucracy to deliver a good contract. The pattern set in freight, and earlier in the postal contracts, has been imposed on a rebellious UPS work force. The employers in most industries have made it known that they are satisfied with the wage increases won in the trucking industry. More than likely, this will be the pattern that other employers try to impose on their workers, even as inflation heats up. In the area of working conditions, the freight pact was again inconclusive. The companies won the flexible work week in the Western and Central States Supplements, but were forced to give some concessions to road drivers. The results of the UPS Central States fight were similar.

From the point of view of our perspective, however, an important breakthrough was made in freight and in UPS. In the freight fight, the TDC grew in nine months to a widespread movement with significant popular support. No doubt it forced the two-day strike called by Fitz, and prevented the contract from being even worse than it was. Most importantly, it gave many teamsters the feeling that they had fought together for the first time in years and on a scale that was greater than ever before. Most of the activists in TDC came to see it as the first step in a movement that would change the teamsters union.

UPSurge went even farther in the UPS Central States' fight than did TDC in freight. UPSurge was nearly a majoritarian movement. Like TDC, it was far more a movement than an organization, but it was able to gain control of strike activity in most mid-western cities. When the union refused to organize the official two-week strike, UPSurge activists stepped into the vacuum. As a result of hard work on the picket lines, UPSurge grew during the official strike. Its impact on subsequent events stemmed from its ability to organize the sentiment the backed it into actual strike action.

TDC and UPSurge have provided us with a wealth of experience from which to draw. A large part of assessing where we must go from here lies in drawing the lessons of those two experiences.

In general, we learned much in both movements about how to formulate and push our line in a mass movement. In truth we entered this phase of our perspective with little experience in movements of this size and scope. As a result some of our early lines were clumsy and abstract. A good example of this is the way we tried to use the 1970 wildcat as an argument for a similar, though more organized, action in 1976. We bluntly stated that 1970 had been a victory, which proved rank and file action was the way forward. We soon learned that most teamsters who had participated in the 1970 strike viewed it as a defeat. Better late than never, we learned how to put our case for the 1970 wildcat in a way that corresponded to what the workers were thinking, rather than our simplistic way.

We have also become more skilled in understanding the real sentiments of the non-socialist workers. In particular, this was true of strike sentiment, or the real lack of it. In the case of UPSurge we tended to overestimate the real willingness of people to strike unofficially. Only a few weeks before the strike we were still assuming that a wildcat was a virtual certainty. As the strike drew closer, we discovered that most UPSurge activists did not favor a wildcat, or rather did not feel they were strong enough to pull it off. That led us to underestimate what the UPS ranks would do when a sell-out came in. We prepared for a "vote no" movement, but last minute sentiment against an outrageous sell-out produced strike action. IS leaders were able to respond in time to these changes. Indeed, the experiences of the contract fights in freight and UPS have taught us much better how to feel out the situation and respond.

There are other more specific lessons to be drawn from TDC and UPSurge. They can be listed and briefly described:

1. Revolutionaries can lead mass movements over specific goals. That is, we have shown that we can fill the vacuum left by the labor bureaucracy and lead fights against the employers on a massive scale. Workers who disagree with our politics, even those who are politically hostile, have illusions in this or that union official, or are blinded by racism, will join with us and accept our political leadership. It is now safe to say that we have won our position in the leadership of the rank and file movement in the teamsters union, and we have won it as open revolutionary socialists.

2. Revolutionary organization is a necessary part of the rank and file movement. The ideas, political and organizational, that we proposed, were not likely to come from other sources. The majority of militants still had deep illusions in many traditional and capitalist ideas. Indeed, we know that everyone has such illusions until they become part of a revolutionary organization and are able to resist the pressures of society that create these illusions. Neither TDC nor UPSurge would have had the strength or political cohesiveness that they did--as weak as that was--without the part played by the IS and its industrial cadre.

3. Revolutionary organization is necessary for the effective functioning of revolutionary workers in their industry and union. The IS members on the front lines of the fight are subject to the same pressures as any worker. Indeed, in order to understand the real mood of the majority of worker activists, the socialist workers must share some of those ideas and feelings. This is inevitable, and, under the right political circumstances, even healthy. A revolutionary who is out of touch with the rest of the workers is of little use to them or to the IS. This often means, however, that the industrial cadre will tend to reflect some of the conservative views of the majority of the workers. The organization as a whole, workers in other industries, the full-time leadership can and should act as a corrective to this. In brief, we have learned that a growing collaboration between all sections of the organization's leadership is crucial to the successful execution of our perspective.

4. We learned that the building of the organized rank and file movement requires almost as much systematic training as the building of the party. No one is born an organizer. Those of us who have been in the radical and socialist movements for even a short period of time have learned many organizational techniques. We often assume that other workers will know these as well. But in the US, the organizational experience of the working class, beyond the local work place, is the near-monopoly of the labor bureaucracy. Organizational traditions are weak and disconnected in the American working class. For this reason, both TDC and UPSurge often appeared stronger than they really were. In both cases, solid organization is yet to be built. And this will be largely the result of the development of an experienced leadership which we help train. Unfortunately, we did not begin this process until very late.

5. In most situations red-baiting can and has been defeated. Only in places where our roots were thin, or where the local bureaucracy was united and powerful and repressive did red-baiting succeed. Most of the red-baiting attacks that went beyond verbal baiting have taken the form of crude leaflets that were supposed to expose the IS and its secret ambitions. The most effective response, by both TDC and UPSurge, has generally been signed leaflets that explain that red-baiting is an attempt by a discredited bureaucracy to divide a growing rank and file movement. Leaflets that have been signed by non-IS'ers as well as IS'ers have been very effective. By this time, IS teamsters have established their legitimacy in the rank and file movement. Red-baiting will certainly continue, but for the moment, it is less effective even than it was at first.

6. One of the political weaknesses of TDC was that it was unable to focus its program on a couple of major demands when the sell-out came. The IS did not provide leadership in this respect. We did not come up with a small number of demands that could focus the anger of the majority of teamsters. The wide variety of demands that appeal to or apply to different categories of workers in the freight industry made this political choice extremely difficult. Focussing down on a small number of demands makes it much easier to conduct strike action against the employers and the union leadership for the purpose of forcing them to come up with a decent settlement. If you

have too many demands, the rank and file feel, quite correctly, that the program is unrealistic. With one or two major demands, it is more possible to force the union negotiators to get specific concessions from the reluctant employers.

7. A rank and file movement, even a relatively narrowly focussed contract campaign, has a set of politics of its own. This includes not only its demands and tactics, but a whole range of political ideas that provide it with a viable strategy. An understanding of the politics of the union and the position of the rank and file movement in those politics is a part of this. Transitional ideas such as the "employers' offensive" or many of the ideas associated with class struggle unionism form the meat of those politics. We learned, often very slowly, how to put forward the politics of the movement we were building. Winning other worker militants to those politics and popularizing them was essential to the moderate successes of TDC. Most of all, those politics provided the bridge to the next stage of the movement, the on-going opposition organization. Convoy was the primary means of getting those politics out, of popularizing them, and of beginning to build a leadership "cadre" for TDC.

8. While work in the union was virtually an obsession with freight activists, often with a union reform content, UPS employees were generally inexperienced in union affairs. The tone of UPSurge, indeed much of its underlying dynamic, was based in confrontation with the company. As a result the agitational emphasis of UPSurge was always on the company. Yet, experience showed that there was no avoiding a fight in the union. The grievance procedure and bargaining structure faced by UPS workers is essentially the same as in freight. The politics of the teamsters union as a whole determine the fate of UPS contracts, working conditions, and the ways in which the workers can fight back. As the contract expiration date drew near, an orientation toward the union, and intervention in union meetings, became an important part of the strategy. The relationship of the fight in UPS to events in the rest of the teamsters union, however, remained unclear for quite some time. During and after the strike, a rather heavy emphasis on pressure on the union and intervention in the union became a necessary corrective.

9. We learned again and again the central importance of building a political periphery and of recruiting out of it. With so few experienced militants to carry the organizational and political work of TDC and UPSurge, we were severely over-stretched in terms of resources. The only real solution to this was the recruitment and training of new worker cadres. Clearly the biggest failure of TDC, for us, was the failure to recruit. The reasons for this shortcoming were many and deserve examination.

In part, of course, it was a subjective political failure. The crunch of resources meant always making hard choices between the day-to-day work of TDC and the more long-range work involved in recruitment. For the first several months of TDC, the choice was always the day-to-day activity of TDC. In truth, however, the reasons for so little recruitment from TDC are more complicated. There were four main reasons:

- (1) During the final three months of TDC, the IS virtually liquidated much of its leadership and normal functioning into TDC-oriented work. This meant that in a very real way, there was no IS, as such, to bring teamsters to. There were few forums or public meetings. Even branches ceased functioning in some cases.
- (2) As mentioned, the crunch of resources meant that few of the teamster militants of the IS had time to discuss politics in a serious way with contacts or friends. Winning people to our politics is often a time-consuming process, and time was in short supply during the TDC campaign.
- (3) Related to this was the fact that the majority of teamsters are quite politically conservative. The tone of that union is conservative and apolitical. While the main activists of TDC were by no means politically right-wing, they, like ourselves, function in a conservative atmosphere so far as politics are concerned. Thus the building of a real political periphery, much less actual recruitment, is a more time-consuming process than is true in other industries. The actual formation of a real political periphery only began in the wake of the freight strike.
- (4) We were slow to be conscious of the development of a set of politics for TDC itself, as already mentioned. The political content of that movement, the employers' offensive, class struggle unionism, etc., would have allowed us to begin earlier the process of building a political periphery because it is precisely those ideas that open the way to broader political perspectives. The political discussion surrounding the transition from TDC to an on-going group will help this process a lot.

To recruit rank and file teamsters to the IS, and even just to build a solid rank and file movement inside the IBT, we are forced to take a serious approach toward winning IBT members to the fights against racism and sexism. In launching TDC, we intentionally avoided the mechanical and moralistic approach of going out and looking for an anti-racist and an anti-sexist demand to tack onto the program to make the record on these points. We designed a program based on the live issues in the IBT among rank and file members--a program around which IBT members would be willing to fight. In doing this, we built an on-going movement in which concrete issues around racism and sexism will be raised, and in which we can win IBT members to our views.

The vast majority of workers in the trucking industry as a whole are white and fairly well-paid, they are quite distant from the experience of the black working class--far more distant, certainly, than white auto workers in Detroit or many other places. Teamsters often live in those neighborhoods that are most opposed to busing. Yet it would be a mistake to write off all teamsters as hopeless racists. For, in fact, the majority of leaders in the TDC and UPSurge are not blatant racists, Wallaceites, or anything of the sort. Many of them were, however, removed from much contact with black people. They can be won to an understanding of the oppressed position

of black people in this country and to how that affects the working class movement. In fact, some have already been won to our general view on this question. But no one will be won to our point of view if we do not put it forth and fight for it in the teamster rank and file movement.

The winning of the teamster rank and file leadership to an anti-racist outlook is essential to the success of that movement. We know this and must fight for it. In the document authored by Ken Paff, TDC Secretary, and put forth as the political basis for the formation of an on-going opposition organization, the question of racism as a political question has been raised. We will have to solidify this general political statement into concrete actions, such as support to a possible consent decree, and fight for their adoption in that movement.

In what was the TDC, much the same must be said of women's liberation. However, the fact that a number of the national and local leaders of UPSurge, in particular Ann Mackie, are women provides us with an important and realistic way to bring women's issues into the on-going opposition movement in the teamsters union. Indeed, the presence of women in the leadership of UPSurge and TDC allowed us to counter some of the "stand by your man" sentiment among Teamsters and their wives.

While freight and trucking generally will always be the center of any movement in the teamsters union, larger numbers of blacks, latins, and women work in various other industries organized by the teamsters. Part of the strategy of the on-going opposition must be to win these underpaid and highly exploited workers to the rank and file movement. This will require special attention to the demands of the oppressed. It will require a rank and file movement that genuinely fights for their special needs as well as the general needs of all teamsters.

In most of the upcoming contracts in which we will have direct involvement, the role of women and black workers will be more central than was possible in the teamsters union. In auto, telephone, and steel to a lesser extent, the proportion of women and blacks is much higher. In auto, demands around job security will be of the greatest relevance to black and women workers, who were most hurt by the last depression. In telephone, demands for up-grading traditionally "female jobs," clerical and traffic, will focus the needs of the large proportion of black women who work in those jobs. In steel, the fight around the consent decree will be central.

In each of these industries, as in trucking, the fight against racism and sexism will have to be a central part of the program of whatever on-going movements or organizations come out of the contract fights in those industries. This will mean not only general positions in opposition to racism, but the bringing in of concrete issues both in industry and outside. Not only will it be necessary to fight racist and sexist foremen, but issues like busing and Gary Tyler will have to become part of the political life of any class struggle oriented rank and file movement.

The TDC, the long strike in rubber, and the UPS wildcat have set an escalating pattern of militancy for the rank and file of those unions whose contracts expire in the coming year and a half. While the rank and file movement has yet to force the hand of the bureaucracy or fully defeat any major employer, the movement has grown in strength and experience. Each new movement is able to draw on the experience and morale of those already in motion. And the effect is cumulative, for neither TDC nor UPSurge have closed up shop. Rather, they have moved toward becoming a serious opposition in the biggest union in the world.

In auto, the fight has already begun. The Coalition for a Good Contract (CGC) has set up the structure and apparatus into which mass sentiment can flow as the contract draws nearer. The CGC differs from the TDC or UPSurge in that it is more of a coalition of organized and semi-organized forces than either of the other two. In CGC, forces to the right of us have joined with us for the purpose of breaking open the contract fight in that industry. While rank and filers have yet to flow into CGC in significant numbers, its broad nature will help make that process easier. By moving some relatively conservative local and rank and file leaders, the CGC can help break down the prevailing feeling that you can't fight city hall.

While activity is minimal now, it is likely to grow with the summer. Summer traditionally brings a rise in shop floor action in many auto plants. While this action will not necessarily be directly concerned with the contract, it will allow CGC activists an opportunity to do some agitational work. In some places it may be possible to link actions with concern around local contract issues and in this way bring shop floor militants into CGC activities. A variety of local and national events should provide opportunities for modest activities that can help CGC grow and become an influential actor in the contract fight.

Rank and file motion and interest in the contract have been slow to surface. But within the secondary leadership of the union, there is a growing lack of confidence in the contract preparations of the top leadership. As a group, the secondary leadership is gutless, and only a handful of isolated individuals have ever been willing to publicly speak out and express their lack of confidence. Rank and file pressure, or other events not yet anticipated, could still lead to a section of this secondary leadership breaking away from the top during negotiations. Any such development would create important openings for rank and file action, and we are well positioned to take advantage of this.

The top leadership, as well, is in crisis. Woodcock is scheduled to retire next year, and there is a succession struggle going on. So far all sides have agreed to keep the fight private until after the contracts are negotiated. But they are having a hard time doing it. More and more signs of the fight are surfacing, and this too could help open things up.

Woodcock seems to be trying to avoid a strike altogether this contract, because he believes an auto strike would hurt the Democratic Party candidate in the elections, which come six weeks after the contract expires. But trying to sell a contract without any strike will be very hard.

The CGC, though still weak, is the only real force in the field. We are prepared to take advantage of all opportunities, but we will not be able to dictate the course of events.

While the telephone contract is a year off, United Action (UA) has already made plans to begin an intervention. UA plans to call a broad convention caucus around a small list of resolutions recently passed by the National Black Communications Coalition, in which UA and IS members are active. These demands focus on the major issues in the up-coming contract, including the way in which the contract is to be negotiated--the "District 10 Resolutions." They call for a strike vote, open bargaining, no contract-no work, and ratification prior to returning to work. The central contract demands are the 32-hour week at 40 hours pay, and the upgrading of traffic and clerical jobs to the level of the lowest craft job (frameman).

At the end of the first year of our two and a half year perspective, the IS's industrial work is deeper than ever. For all the mistakes and failures, TDC and UPSurge have been successes. Our position as a political trend in the teamsters union is respected by many rank and file activists and is generally secure. We have only begun to build a political periphery. But we do now have such a periphery, although it is still quite small. For reasons mentioned above, recruitment among teamsters will be a slow process. Nevertheless, we have made the first real steps.

From the vantage point of our industrial work, one of the most important tasks in the coming year will be the solidifying of functioning national fractions. While fractions are no substitute for the full life of a revolutionary organization, they must have a certain life of their own in order to professionally guide the work. Fractions, locally and nationally, will also be instrumental in building a political periphery for the IS and in recruitment. Much of the work of training our own industrial cadre and leadership, as well as training non-socialist rank and file leaders, will fall on the fractions. Beginning with this convention, national fractions will have regular national meetings. So that these may occur more than once a year, they may have to be delegated. In this way, a broader section of our industrial leadership can have more input into the implementation and formulation of our perspectives for the industrial priorities. This process will help train and broaden our cadre to become more effective working class leaders.

The End