

Tasks for the '80s ★ August 28-30, Detroit, Michigan

For the I.S. Organizational Session

I.S. Political Committee

For members only

IN POLITICS, there is no such thing as standing still. One lesson we should have learned from our experience as a "federation" is that the IS cannot proceed indefinitely in a holding pattern. If we are to survive, (a) our own members have to be convinced that survival is a worthwhile goal, and (b) we have to be able to convince others. That is, recruit.

In order to recruit, we need a political explanation of our purpose and our importance as a defined tendency. We have to believe it, and we have to be able to convince others.

THE I.S. HAS SHARED some experiences with the rest of the left: collapse of party-building perspectives, and serious involvement in trade union work over a period of several years. In addition, we have done what much of the rest of the left has not: maintained a stable body of politics and a political world view which — unlike the politics of many groups — has been strengthened, not shattered, by world events, and which links our work to our vision of socialism.

People will join the IS in ones and twos because of our record in building the rank & file movement (even though they have to beat down the door to get in). However, most people will have to be convinced to join. Right now, our members feel unable or unwilling to carry out this task. Part of the reason is that we no longer have a structure to recruit to, but that's a symptom, not a cure. The real reason is that IS members are not sufficiently motivated to recruit. Members are unconvinced of the justification for a very small revolutionary socialist organization.

Part of the justification is our position on regroupment: we stand for a broad, revolutionary, democratic socialist regroupment counterposed to social democracy. But the regroupment perspective is insufficient by itself since we know the forces do not exist to make it an implementable perspective.

We are all too aware of the growing influence of social democracy expressed most dramatically in the absorption of NAM by DSOC. This is an important phenomenon which cannot be ignored. However, it is not occurring because the perspectives of social democracy are successful. Indeed, these perspectives are a stunning failure. The Democratic Party is not becoming a popular-based opposition movement with an "invisible labor party" at its core. The Democratic Party is fleeing to the right at a rate that astonishes even those of us who predicted it. Yet that is also why social democracy is experiencing growth: it fills a vacuum that liberalism has left in its rightward retreat.

The IS has become a pole for activists in the labor movement who are formulating a different strategy to fill that vacuum (especially since this spring): a strategy based on rank and file organization, a revival of militant labor traditions, independent political action, and a labor party. Part of our task is to convince activists who share some, or all, of these ideas that the politics of social democracy are an obstacle to achieving them.

The bottom line is to show why revolutionary politics are relevant, even in periods of reaction. We must be able to show that IS politics can explain the world, and can also do something even more critical: help revolutionaries organize themselves to carry on with the job of changing it. For many on the left, especially those who also have the experience of the failure of party-building efforts, the IS is the only group that can make the case convincingly.

Bluntly put, if socialists in the Teamsters had the politics of DSOC instead of the IS, there would be no TDU. More than any other single factor, TDU is the product of the political conviction that Teamsters could create their own organization to transform — from the ground up, and from the inside — the most bureaucratized and corrupt union in the country.

Social democracy, which views the politics of the liberal labor officials as the "left wing of the possible" could not have taken the initiative to build TDU, no matter how dedicated many of its members may be.

Likewise, Labor Notes is distinctly the product of our politics. Neither the social democratic, orthodox Trotskyist, or Maoist groups of recent years, could have put out a labor publication that embraced a national overview, rank and file perspective, a non-sectarian approach and the depth of understanding that has won Labor Notes wide respect in the trade union left and reform movements.

Both Labor Notes and TDU are a testimony to the importance of the differences in the way that revolutionaries function, even in periods when revolution seems remote. An unconscious form of tribute to this fact is paid by numerous labor activists who depend on the existence of the IS for Labor Notes or other

aspects of their work and for whom the demise of the IS, no matter how much they disagree with us on other questions, would be a threat.

BUT WE CANNOT RELY on the success of our trade union work to recruit. We must begin to pull our organization back together from the retreat of the past two years. We must have at least a modest structure to recruit to.

Many revolutionaries who went through the party-building hysteria of the 70s are burned out. They are relieved at the collapse of the revolutionary left, because they don't want to be called upon to go through the alienating experiences of building a party, like hawking a newspaper at plant gates.

However, we argue that politics and organization go together. Most people agree that they need organizations for anti-war work, or trade union work. Well, without organization, socialist politics cannot grow and develop either. In fact, politics can only develop, stay modern, not ossified, through organization.

The recently adopted "Perspectives for the Detroit District" made the case:

"While we have successfully trained our members, we have not successfully built the IS. For the last year or two we have not felt that it was possible to build the IS, but times are changing. The Labor Notes Conference enhanced the reputation of the IS. Many participants understood the role of the IS in catalyzing Labor Notes.

"Some of these people probably would like Labor Notes to be the vehicle for regroupment; we know this is not possible because Labor Notes is not a socialist organ. However, there are going to be opportunities for the IS to capitalize on the desire for regroupment, and we should start to take advantage of these opportunities. . . . If we allow the IS to deteriorate, our effectiveness in working towards regroupment is diminished because we are not a serious pole. . . .

"We have to start to recruit those people who admire our work. We should cast the widest possible net. While we will recruit only a small percentage, it should be clear to our friends (and our own members) that we consider joining the IS to be an important step that they should take."

THE I.S. HAS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTIONS to make, theoretically and practically, to building a socialist presence in the working class. We have a perspective for the emerging labor left which is critical, for which there is an audience, and which is shared by few other groups. We must stress these points, and build on them, especially:

1. Providing a sharp, clear analysis of the crisis, explaining why the intensification of the employer/government offensive against the working class is inevitable.

2. Linking our analysis of the crisis to our strategy for the labor left. That link is the need for rank and file organization as the key to successful resistance to the employers' offensive. This understanding is the bedrock of our critique of the labor bureaucracy, including the liberal wing and its political expression, social democracy.

3. Demonstrating the actionability of our analysis and perspective. To be viable, a political group must take its ideas and act upon them. The immediate question facing labor and all social movements is how to mount an effective resistance against Reaganism (from budget cuts, to wage-slashing, to right-wing social policy, to militarism). We should focus on strategic and tactical ways in which the labor left in various cities, unions, or coalitions can help organize such struggles and build solidarity with them.

4. Defining our organization. What defines the IS politically is not a "party-building" line, but our view of socialism as the consistent application and generalization of working class democracy, including our understanding that capitalism cannot be patched up through reform, and that the only progressive alternative to this system is socialist revolution.

The above points are elements of a perspective which we counterpose to various forms of sectarianism and reformism. They are not a full; statement of what the IS is about and does.

THE LEFT FACES a rapidly changing situation in the unions, in industry, in American politics, and on the left. Reagan has graphically demonstrated that he intends to heat up the class struggle. We expect that new people will be radicalized through these attacks. Revolutionaries must maintain a revolutionary pole that can attract these new activists. It is this potential motion that will break down the barriers towards a broad, revolutionary, democratic socialist regroupment. The IS has a role to play in this process.

And finally, the question of organization is not only relevant to recruitment, or future possibilities of a

working class upsurge. With the escalation of the offensive against the working class, there is little doubt that we are missing opportunities and heading towards political mistakes as a result of our disorganization. Whether it's in steel, the anti-war movement, or at the Labor Notes Conference, we minimize our impact because there has been no "we," just individuals acting more or less on their own. We have to turn this around, not with a return to democratic centralism, but by taking basic organizational steps that are crucial if we are not simply to lose our way in the flux of the 1980s.

Organizational Resolutions

THESE RESOLUTIONS, while modest, are a step forward for the IS. They aim to cohere the organization by initiating political discussion and re-establishing organizational structure.

In addition to the proposals listed here, the center will continue to publish *Changes*, put out the IS Newsletter, organize an annual Summer Conference, and take overall responsibility for the political direction of the group.

Most of these proposals are about what the center will do. However, we do expect a response from the organization. There are resolutions on re-establishing political life in the organization, using *Changes*, etc. which require a commitment from all members. Strengthening the group is something we have to do together, or it won't happen.

I. Discussion Bulletin. The rapidly changing situation in the unions, in industry, and in American politics highlights the need for reviving political discussion among IS members and friends. The PC proposes a Discussion Bulletin to be published twice a year. The PC will organize written discussion on key questions. The Bulletin can also include branch perspectives, discussion of our work in the labor movement, in the social movements, etc. The Bulletin is not to duplicate *Changes*, nor sap writers away from *Changes*. It is meant for members, but can be used selectively with friends.

II. National Meetings. To further this process of political discussion, the PC will organize one (possibly two) National Meeting in addition to the annual Summer Conference. Topics for the National Meeting will be prepared through the Discussion Bulletin. In addition, National Meetings will enable the group to expand its leadership. National Meetings will be open to all members, but each branch will be expected to send at least one member. The PC will also seek representation from areas of work, etc.

III. Re-establish Political Life. Branch life is important to create a political and organizational framework, without which the IS will lose opportunities both for recruitment and work. The PC asks the organization to endorse a policy of organizing regular local political meetings on broad political questions, as well as the work of members.

IV. Speakers Bureau and Speakers Tours. To aid the branches, the PC will attempt to solicit and publicize in the Newsletter individuals available to speak on topics on which they are expert. In addition, the PC will attempt to carry some political discussions into the branches.

V. Using Labor Notes. Labor Notes has developed into an organizing tool for the work of an important section of the trade union left. Many of its readers use Labor Notes in their work — distributing it among co-workers, writing for it, organizing local meetings under LN's auspices.

Labor Notes is an invaluable resource for getting out news of struggles, building solidarity (for example, the miners strike), generating discussions which need to take place within the broad trade union left.

Building Labor Notes should be a priority of the group. How? There are the obvious things — distribute it, sell subs, write for it. Contact the LN office about setting up lit tables at appropriate events. Use and distribute LN literature, get it into bookstores. Pick up on initiatives suggested in the pages of LN — like the Sept. 19 demonstration.

Over the next year, LN plans to embark on a program of travelling, holding various types of meetings and conferences. A new pamphlet is proposed on the change in labor relations. Members, where appropriate, should assist in these activities.

VI. Dues The PC encourages branches to have centralized dues collection. Where this does not happen, the PC will consult individuals to establish regular pledges.

VII. Pamphlets Three pamphlets are proposed for the coming year:

1. Revise the "Basic Education Program" published by the IS in 1976. Marilyn D. has agreed to revise and update. To be used with beginning classes. Projected to be published (mimeographed) late fall.

2. Why You Should Join the IS. A draft of this pamphlet was written last year by the PC, but never completed. Dan L. has agreed to re-write.

3. Expanded version of The Rank and File Movements by Kim. Will use three articles from Changes, one on labor in the 80s, another on wage cutting, and the recently published one on the rank and file movement. Also will add a section on the labor party.

IX. Changes The Political Committee feels that Changes must receive greater attention in the coming year. Changes is the public face of the IS, and must be developed as the main vehicle through which the analysis and politics of the IS are presented.

Changes has a small audience within the revolutionary democratic left. The audience includes independents, industrialized radicals, ex-members, and those leftists with whom we are in dialogue, like Solidarity. We need to expand this audience. We must develop our labor coverage so the magazine can be used more effectively with leftists in the unions. We also should address the questions of ex-Maoists.

Over the last year, the magazine has not had a clear direction. This year, the editorial board proposes that the central focus for Changes be to explain the relevance of revolutionary socialist politics in the 1980s. In other words, the magazine — like the organization — must position itself as a pole for those who reject sectarianism and social democracy.

To do this, Changes will give particular attention to the following:

1. Developing our analysis of the crisis. Capitalism, domestically and internationally, has already been through a decade of instability. We are now going through the third "stagflation recession," and the prospects for the future show deepening structural unemployment, permanent and intractable inflation, etc. Changes coverage of the economy should address the question: does the system have a way out? Are there reformist solutions to the crisis?

2. The labor movement. Despite the growth of the crisis in the 1970s, the working class response did not meet our expectations. We have, however, maintained the view that rank and file activity (defined broadly, not just in the sense of small programatically-defined groups) is key to the effective resistance against the attacks on the unions. This conception of the centrality of rank and file organization, and our ability to influence it, will be tested in the course of the next few years. This means we must continue to put forward our ideas on the tasks of the labor left, and in particular our strategy for what we have identified as one of the key responsibilities: building the sentiment for a labor party.

In addition, we must make more of an effort to have "insiders" coverage of labor events. For example, the steel elections. This will make the magazine far easier to use in our work. This means that we will have to get articles from some of the groups' most reluctant writers.

3. The right-wing offensive and social movements. Black, women's and other social movements are going to be defined in the next few years primarily by how effectively they can defend key gains against the right-wing assault on social policy. What kind of effective coalitions can be built to defeat the right? What is the role of the Democratic Party and its various factions?

4. Socialist politics and organization. American politics are moving to the right. At the same time, we no longer have our former view that a very small revolutionary socialist group, through the strength of its politics, can become a revolutionary party by itself. We must therefore clearly identify the role of revolutionary socialist organization; exactly where, and how, can our perspectives be translated into "practical politics" that the labor left and sections of the working class can fight for?

The above list does not exhaust the list of topics where attention is needed. In particular, the growing relevance of the European economies and social-democratic parties to the U.S. economy and the left cannot be ignored as we have tended to do. It highlights the central focus and the main topics that flow from it.

It has also been suggested that we seek coverage of some of the political debates developing around Latin America. This is difficult because our information is limited. We do plan an article on Nicaragua which will discuss some of the problems with the Sandinistas.

X. Political Committee. A Political Committee slate will be voted on in this session.

more confrontations — ^{live} journal debate with a easy mite
— extensive reviews —