

Xerox For Organizing Committee

Dear Comrades,

In April of this year, the Modern Times (MT) collective, which had been in existence for over three years, dissolved. Political differences had become irreconcilable and this was the only course left. These three years were wasted if no lessons can be drawn from that body of practice.

The four of us who drew up this paper found that our practice in MT and our discussions after the break-up as well led us to certain general conclusions about the basic politics of MT. These conclusions led us to join the International Socialists (IS) some five months later. The purpose of this paper is to present an outline of the process we went through so that it can be evaluated by others in situations that may have some similarity to ours. We would hope that other independent radicals and independent collectives might make similar contributions as well.

We're not attempting to deal with the politics of the split as much as the shared politics of Modern Times. We think it was the failure of these shared politics that brought about the dissolution of the collective. This paper and our organizational affiliation is our response to that failure.

At the same time we feel that there is in many ways a direct continuity between the most basic body of MT politics -- a commitment to "socialism from below", rank and file workers' democracy, opposition to "bureaucratic socialism" -- and the politics of IS. What happened with the four of us is that we changed our assessment of what the implications of "socialism from below" were in terms of organization and strategy.

We hope this paper may provide the occasion for some useful discussion among the independents and we would certainly be more than glad to continue this discussion with you.

In Struggle,

Christina

Mike

Todd

Tom

Modern Times (MT), like many other independent collectives, grew out of the reorientation of the student, anti-war, and women's movements which occurred in the late 1960's. We had developed a commitment to building a working class movement and saw industrializing ourselves as a necessary step in that process. We saw ourselves as being primarily a workplace organizing collective, but because of our lack of jobs and our inexperience, the paper was the prime focus of the group's work for its first year (1971-72).

Though the newspaper was not the main strategic priority of the group, it was certainly the most visible face of MT. It concentrated on reporting local and national news from a rank and file point of view, trying to simply and non-rhetorically discuss events on a class-struggle basis. One main aspect of the MT approach was that it did not see its job as that of haranguing workers with a sales pitch for MT's own particular sectarian program for the country, that union or that workplace. The newspaper was seen as a catalyst for rank and file activity, not the initiator or leader of it. It was seen as a mass paper, not just aimed at "worker militants."

MT did not see working class oppression and struggle as limited to the economic spheres. We saw all social and cultural issues as having a class content and tried to approach them in that light. Problems of divorce, day care, role of the automobile, dating, television -- we tried to understand all of these from a class-conscious perspective.

On to Organizing

As the newspaper work developed, some of us were beginning to find jobs with organizing potential. Our longest and most conscientious efforts were centered around a medium-sized electrical factory where we eventually placed three comrades. We had a valuable, though brief series of involvements at the phone company through the experiences of one comrade, and we had one comrade placed in hospital work which though it lasted a considerable period of time, never developed as an organizing situation.

Modern Times was also involved from the beginning in the work of the Cleveland TURF chapter (Teamster rank and file group) and was active in the independent truckers' strike. We also had comrades placed, at various times, in a large machine tool company, steel mills, an auto plant and an auto parts plant. However, these either came very near the end of the group's existence or were of such brief duration that little was done with the potential of those situations.

While the group didn't have a hard political line on anything, there were a number of basic general assumptions that conditioned the approach of the newspaper and the group at every turn. Summarizing these would be:

1. A serious focus on point of production struggles, not simply formal strikes but the entire range of resistance efforts made by workers in their daily work routine. The group saw workplace organizing as being its prime focus when its members situated themselves in industry, although the group did take part in other activities in the city.
2. A critical position toward the trade unions, emphasizing the thoroughly collaborationist nature of the union bureaucracy, and pointing out that the role of the unions, per se, in many ways opposed workers' interests.

3. A critical position towards the notion of a vanguard party which somehow ran the revolution for the working class or ruled the society over the working class.
4. An understanding of the role women play in the class, both as waged and unwaged workers. The woman question is not simply a struggle against male chauvinism. Whether on the job, in the home, or within a family, the struggle of women is the class struggle.
5. A belief that the position of Black workers made them the most advanced sector of the working class. Racism is the prime barrier to class unity in this country and the paper saw as one of its main tasks, reporting on and explaining Black liberation struggles as working class struggles -- struggles that white workers must see as in their own class interests.
6. A realization that the working class is not just economically exploited on the job, but is socially and culturally oppressed by the domination of bourgeois ideology and social forms. Every effort to break through this mystification and every struggle to create forms and attitudes which resolve the contradictions in working class life are essential to the developing process of opposition to the status quo.
7. Behind and within each of these other positions is our dominant sense of socialism as the democratic control of the entire society as well as the means of production by the working class to serve its own interests. This entails a revolution in the entire gamut of social relationships, not only those of production. This is the revolutionary process, not just a humanistic afterthought. A process of social struggle which ignores this may lead to great change but it will not create socialism.

LOCALISM AND THE INDEPENDENT COLLECTIVE

Looking back on the MT experience we see that many of our difficulties were conditioned by our situation as a small, local and fairly isolated collective. This is not to say that these shortcomings flow necessarily out of a group's being small and local. They can certainly be overcome by other forces, conditions existent in the collective. Rather, we are describing a set of pressures that operate on all small collectives.

We knew before we started that there would be a lot of problems and limitations with our small local collective-to-be. But we chose to accept whatever limitations those might be in order to try and develop ourselves outside of the national organizations that existed. We thought that we could perceive and learn a lot more about the working class without the political blinders that the national organizations would certainly provide us with. This wasn't entirely mistaken. We did learn a lot of things about working class life, culture, consciousness that have escaped some of our more organized comrades. The newspaper Modern Times tried to convey a sense of this.

Limitations of Localism - a High Price to Pay

We paid a high price for this development, however. Specifically, our theoretical and practical development towards a strategy was held back considerably in the narrow environment of the small collective. In some ways it was a Catch 22. We always wanted to link up with something larger than ourselves in order to gain the political maturity we were lacking. But we couldn't bring

that linkup about precisely because we were lacking in political maturity. This was the case with many others of the network of independent collectives as well, though some of the collectives were certainly more developed and less subject to these pressures on a small group.

So lacking anything more than a loose network with the other independent collectives, we were fairly isolated from the socialist movement. In regard to the working class movement, we were too deep into the forest to see the trees. It was extremely difficult to get an overview from our Cleveland vantage point. We certainly tried to keep in touch with as many groups and individuals around the country and read as many papers, journals, etc as we could. Yet the small circle of discussion in MT remained a definite limitation in everything we did - not insurmountable, but there nonetheless.

We were too small to have any sufficient body of practice upon which to generalize, and what practice we had was very unevenly distributed among the group. Although we had the practice of the entire working class movement at our disposal in books, there was a certain minimal amount of shop floor experience necessary before these books made any sense.

THE MAIN PROBLEM HOWEVER, WAS THAT WHEN WE REACHED A TENTATIVE HYPOTHESIS TOWARDS A WORKPLACE STRATEGY, IT WAS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT FOR A GROUP OF THIS SIZE TO IMPLEMENT AND TEST THAT HYPOTHESIS. Just getting members situated in industry is a problem that becomes even more acute when there are only a dozen or so of you. And for MT, a lack of collective discipline compounded this problem. In small inexperienced groups like MT, many members did not possess the confidence to be able to implement that strategy where they worked. This was made evenmore difficult when that member, as was often the case, was alone in that workplace.

Then the final cruncher comes in the process of collective discussion and evaluation of the work in the various workplaces. The narrow circle of discussion seriously limits the effectiveness of these discussions and the collective process, especially when the various workplaces are significantly different from one another.

Localism of the Workplace

Another problem we had to face was the localism of the workplace that further adds to our isolation. Lacking a network of contacts in similar workplaces in the same industry around the country, the small workplace group tends to see its own local issues as having more importance than they should assume. Issues which can't be effectively dealt with on the local level, ones that confront the national or multinational corporation or the international union or the corporate state, are let slide or only dealt with propogandistically. This tends to reinforce the feeling of powerlessness of those involved in the small workplace group. It makes the question of the survival of such groups even more problematic.

Building nationwide (and international) networks of militants in industry is a prime task of socialists working in the rank and file movement. The struggle must be posed on a national level and establishing links between workplace groups is one step that can and must be begun now. It is essential to the survival of these workplace groups, essential to their political development and vital to the building of the national rank and file movement.

Hence what can arise (and what did in the particular case of MT) is a tendency toward empiricism. The group remains on the level of immediate experience because it doesn't have the mass of practice, theoretical development and overall experience to rise above this. Or if one has arrived at a tentative strategy, it is difficult to evaluate its practice in relation to that strategy. Practical developments remain on the level of anecdotes rather than data bearing on the workability of a hypothesis. Let us note here that these factors made it difficult for MT to evaluate its practice but not impossible. Internal political differences made this impossible. (Differences around the nature of class-consciousness, revolutionary leadership and the nature of the trade unions became too extreme to permit meaningful collective discussion).

Other problems sprung from our small size, or at least were exacerbated by it. It is difficult to achieve an effective division of labor in a small group, especially when, as in MT, you are trying to develop everyone in every direction. MT had ambitions far beyond its limited means in terms of its organizing work, its study, publications, etc., etc. It spread itself thin and ended up doing too many things superficially or not at all.

Political differences and personal differences become confused and each exaggerates the other. The smaller the group the more intense this gets, and the more difficult it becomes to resolve these differences.

LEADERSHIP AND THE VANGUARD

Modern Times had a position which was highly critical of the traditional notion of the vanguard or at least very critical of how these notions were propagated on the left. Within the group there were wide differences on this point. Some people rejected any concept of the party as being elitist, substitutionist and inherently bureaucratic. Others felt that perhaps it was not the party as such but a particular relation of party and class--that relation which saw the party as being the source of all proletarian knowledge, the infallible determiner of the correct line, the leader of the class no matter how the class felt about this, and of course the ruler of the state once the revolution had taken place--which was at fault. Certainly, all were skeptical of middle-class revolutionaries carving out for themselves such a leadership position over the class in theory, and had seen in practice how many of these notions blinded people to the intelligence, creativity, and leadership capacities that the class is able to generate within itself. We all realized that if socialism is to mean anything, that capacity must not only fully develop, but will have to take on clear organizational forms to exercise its power. To the extent that vanguard parties, or groups claiming that status, hindered that process, they discredited themselves in our eyes.

As we said earlier, the paper and MT did not see itself as a vanguard in the traditional sense. It was not to be the initiator of struggles or the purveyor of consciousness and program. The articles in the paper or the workplace activity of MT members was not seen as that of the vanguard of the class, but rather that of helpful auxiliaries of some sort or other. In other words, instead of providing a program, we wanted to provide a spark so that workers could come up with their own program from their own self-activity.

The stress on self-activity of the class related directly to our concept of socialism (see point 7 on page 3). Socialist consciousness is

something that develops through struggle, the self-activity of the class - not something that is spoon fed to the class by the elite vanguard. The vanguard party as the manipulator of the masses was seen as antithetical to our notion of socialism. Yet we were only dealing with one side of the question of the process of developing class consciousness - the self-activity side. It took a few more failures before some of us began to come to grips with the other side of leadership.

Uneven Development

Inside of Modern Times, the anti-vanguard ideology made itself felt as well. Political development was not to be the function of a select few-- it should be a group process. As in every other collective, there was a great deal of uneven development. There was no elected leadership within MT as we felt this would formalize the uneven development rather than lessen it. We chose to challenge uneven development by ignoring its existence. In fact what happened was that the differences in development increased.

Much of this attitude toward leadership was rooted in the student movement where a culture of participatory democracy had nurtured most of us, but more importantly from the women's movement and its mistrust of male honchoism. We had a strong stress on internal democracy and pushed all members to be aggressive and develop themselves in all areas. To cut down on the inequalities of skill and experience we deliberately tried to share tasks and responsibilities at all levels of the group's activities. All decisions were made by consensus; the group as a whole made all decisions. There were no interim bodies or administrative groups which could act for it.

Not all of these efforts were misdirected and certainly the impulses behind them were in most cases quite healthy. But the extremes to which we went in these areas effectively paralyzed the group. The basic contradiction was that Modern Times was, in fact, a cadre group, a set of people who had thought a lot about politics, developed ideas about political action, and organized their lives around putting these ideas into practice. Yet our notions about vanguards and leadership rejected this role. Rather than recognizing this reality and learning to use it in a non-demagogic way, we simply tried to deny it.

When it came to deciding on priority areas for industrialization of MT members we ran into more problems. Though we talked extensively about good places to get work, key industrial areas in the city, we never had a collective discipline which could make those decisions meaningful. The group was incapable or unwilling to pressure its members to get work or keep jobs in certain areas.

This failure to enforce any collective discipline about industrialization severely limited our workplace efforts. It meant, in fact, that there was only one work situation where MT members remained long enough and consistently enough to develop a practice whereby we could actually test our theories about workplace organizing. Many valuable experiences were lost, many opportunities missed, and many good people spent a lot of time and energy to little avail.

Every effort towards developing a programmatic or strategic approach was stifled by a feeling that it was arrogantly setting ourselves apart from and above the class, deciding the answers for people, basing ourselves on

abstract theory, etc. This tendency also mitigated against any concentrated push for collective study or theoretical development.

There was an assumption in MT that as our practice broadened and deepened, we would have a better sense of what the problems were that we should address ourselves to. This humility served a progressive function for a while as it kept us from isolating ourselves in theoretical ivory towers. Yet, when it was time to move in a more serious direction toward the formulation of strategy and program, we couldn't make the turn.

TRADE UNIONS - A LEFT CRITIQUE

If our internal organization and functioning created certain problems, they were nowhere more in evidence than in our trade union orientation and the work which flowed from it. Our view of the trade unions was critical to say the least. Not only did we see them as bureaucratically run, but also as serving a very deliberate role in controlling working class militancy, dividing the class along industrial and craft lines, functioning as the organizers of the workforce of the large corporations, holding to very conservative political principles, wedded to the capitalist system, and, unfortunately in too many cases, outrageously corrupt.

So far so good, few would argue with the above criticisms. But MT went further stating that the collaborationist nature of the trade unions was due to the role of the unions as negotiators for the sale of labor-power, in a system of capitalist relations of production. That is, the collaborationist nature of trade unionism is a structural necessity in a capitalist society.

The left critique of contract unionism that Sojourner Truth put forward struck a responsive chord in MT. Yet MT never put forward the "smash the unions" perspective of STO. Despite the structural forces on the unions that made them collaborationist, we thought there was still a role that socialist militants could play in the unions. This role was to point out the reasons for the unions' repeated failures and the necessity for independent organization outside the official union structure. Although socialist militants would have some input into the unions, they were never seen as a prime arena of struggle.

MT saw the independent workers' group as the prime base of its workplace activity. It was hoped that if the group was ideologically independent of trade unionism, that is built around a frank analysis of the bourgeois nature and limitations of the unions, it would not fall into the usual reformist traps. The ideological independence was seen as necessitating an organizational independence as well.

We wanted to create a sense that the power of workers lies in their ability to organize themselves for their own needs directly within the productive process and not to rely on the legalities of the contract, the grievance procedure, the union constitution, government agencies, etc., as protecting their interests. Workers do this all the time through informal work groups, social contacts, job actions, etc. We wanted to make it a more conscious process aimed at more conscious goals.

This is important and we do not feel it represents a wrong direction. It stems directly from our belief that the essence of socialism is workers' control and the essence of the struggle for socialism is the building of that very control- exercised by the working class itself, that is a self-conscious, self-confident and self-reliant rank and file.

Yet what we also found was that our policy of abstention was in direct contradiction to the above goals.

Our most developed experience in this regard was the situation of those comrades who had been working in an electrical plant for a number of years. They had created a small grouping which emerged publicly by handing out a leaflet against certain union practices in front of the plant and then circulating a petition about these same practices the next day. Over half the plant signed the petitions and the union backed down. People sensed a victory. The group enlarged and met to try and keep things going. A wider information network developed which kept departments in contact. A newsletter was started which raised issues around the national contract, stressed health and safety problems, moved against company campaigns to harass and fire new employees, aided wildcats, etc. The group went to union meetings and fought for its positions. It used the shop floor wherever and whenever it could to hold meetings, stop the actions of individual foremen, pressure the outcome of grievances. It was able to stop a few company plans before they were instituted simply by getting the word out and making sure those employees to be affected made their anger heard.

Local Elections: To Run or Not To Run?

The problems arose not from the failures of such work, but from its success. The union elections marked a point of real decision for the group. Having basically built this movement outside the union arena, its strength now led it to consider dealing with the local. Many people wanted group members to run for office since they felt that the local leadership needed changing. But those of us in MT saw the unions as a trap and were so skeptical about winning concrete gains by "taking them over" that we backed away from any thought of running. We were put in the contradictory position of telling people that a change was needed, but not taking the responsibility for making that change.

Many people we worked with had a lot of illusions about the local and what could be gained from it. We talked to them about it and while many saw our point, they still came back to the reality that something had to change. They felt that the union had to be made to work for them. They could see no alternative to going through the trade union structure. We were known as radicals and socialists, but our alternative society and thoughts of workers councils remained little more than a right-on idea. Our alternative for the day-to-day struggle (the independent organization) was based on an overall vision of future possibilities which were meaningless in the immediate context.

Our rejection of the trade unions as agents of struggle and our underestimation of them as arenas of struggle was in large part conditioned by our experiences with the bureaucratic and economist approaches of many left groups. Our approach amounted to "...we will do none of those bad things that were done before--we will only do good things which, however, we, can't concretely elaborate now..." This meant hanging on to an abstract panacea, but a panacea only as long as it remained abstract. Once some of us began to apply it, it lost its status as a panacea and immediately ran into difficulties.

Our alternative also did not understand the nature of trade unions. Our view of the necessary collaborationism of trade unions and the contract system was an extremely superficial view of the situation. We failed to realize that the bourgeois pressures on trade unions and unionists under the contract system will be pressures that any workers' organization will have to face--that is, any workers' organization that seriously attempts to deal with the questions of wages, hours, working conditions, job security, etc.

The collaborationist nature of the trade unions is mainly due to the strength of capital and not the nature of the contract system. The extremely bourgeois nature of US trade unionism is directly related to the development of the class forces in the US.

Certainly capital will try to co-opt and deflect any struggles for working class goals. It will do this to any working class organization whether it calls itself a trade union or not. The point is--are defensive struggles possible under capitalism and can they be a part of the process that could lead to the establishment of workers' power? Can we avoid reformism and still take part in the defensive struggles that will spontaneously arise? Can we help raise these struggles to a higher level, for it is only in such struggle that real class consciousness develops?

Programmatic Plan of Struggle

If we answer these questions in the affirmative, then we can begin to deal realistically with questions as to the form and content of this struggle. If we realize that the collaborationist pressures are not unique to the trade union form, and see the necessity to politically defeat the collaborationist politics of the bureaucrats, the trade union arena becomes a natural place for these struggles. Socialists must politically and organizationally defeat the notion that "what's good for General Motors is good for the US working class." We have to put forward a programmatic plan of struggle against capital and its labor lieutenants. Abstention from this struggle only increases apathy and feelings of powerlessness in the working class.

Our abstention from union elections at the electrical factory did just that. Had we taken the elections seriously we might have been able not only to broaden the context of struggle within the plant, but might also have consolidated ourselves organizationally. A lot of people saw the elections as something to get involved in. Had we run a slate around our own programs, that involvement might have led to greater political and organizational coherence rather than the loose information network that had existed previously.

We failed to understand the difference between running for office and building support for a program of struggle. Afraid of fostering electoral illusions, we chose not to run for office. However, those illusions weren't dissipated by our abstention and we gained nothing by not running. Indeed, we may have lost an opportunity. Having come forward as militants and leaders, we shirked a responsibility to have some sort of an approach to struggle within the trade union arena.

There are problems and dangers of working within trade unions and they should not be underestimated, but the trade unions cannot be avoided and a strategy which simply posits an independent approach gives no guidelines or methods of work when the level of struggle forces it into the trade union arena. The key is to be able to enter that arena with a rank and file perspective and emerge with a rank and file that is more confident of its own powers, its own capacities, and its own willingness to struggle.

In those countries where the working class, in a mass way, is moving beyond the trade union structures--Italy, France, Great Britain--there have been years of collective experience which have led to a conscious understanding of that need on a mass scale. And even in these countries the trade unions are still vitally important. They are not bypassed easily or quickly.

In the United States that collective understanding does not yet exist. It is imperative that the working class learn the limitations of trade unionism and its own ability to move beyond it through collective struggle and those struggles in the present period will have to be fought in and with the trade unions. Socialists must be part of those struggles, not separate from them, and each effort must be consolidated at a higher level than the previous one.

The American working class can learn from the experience of workers in other advanced capitalist countries, as well as from their own experiences, but all those experiences must be cumulatively developed and assimilated through its own practice and struggles. To do that will take a long march through the trade unions to discover, understand, and consolidate the revolutionary power of the class.

Perhaps what was most frustrating about the experience in Modern Times was the fact that our socialist politics, with their stress on workers' democracy were so well received by workers we came into contact with, but we had no way to connect them to the day to day struggles that went on around us. They remained abstract ideas - well received ideas, but still only ideas. We lacked a programmatic bridge between these ideas and the nuts and bolts of the class struggle. Our policy of abstention from serious involvement in trade union areas made this impossible.

If our socialist politics mean anything, we must be able to show workers that it is precisely these politics, our Marxist method of viewing the world, that makes us better able to fight in the day to day struggles, and to provide a road to a new society. We think that the strategy of class struggle unionism provides that bridge. But before we get into that, there are a few more problems that the collective faced that we should discuss.

MODERN TIMES DISSOLVES

In the fall of 1973 things began to heat up within the collective. The group was feeling many pressures. The greatest was that pressure which comes from holding politics which don't work, which, in fact, hinder the group from effectively dealing with the reality that they are trying to "organize." Our positions on the trade unions and leadership and the vanguard especially insured our stagnation.

We were extremely isolated and thrown back upon ourselves. The scope of "ourselves" was much too confining to allow us to grow. Especially, "ourselves" had many fundamental internal differences which had been masked by the general libertarian consensus. When the sledding got tough, the differences which had been held back until then came out in full force. Then it became impossible to have anything but the most superficial discussion without a basic confrontation.

Things had to crack and they certainly did. After the dust had cleared from people letting it all hang out, MT was no more and some wondered if it ever was. The final discussions saw a sorting-out process take place, whereby people retained some of MT's basic positions and discarded others in response to the failure of the total MT perspective. As a result, two fairly distinct poles, as well as a conciliatory center emerged. (It should be noted that the poles were somewhat clearer than the positions of the individual MT members in regard to them).

One pole retained the general anti-union and anti-leadership-vanguard positions of MT, combining them with their own particular aversion to building

lasting organizational structures for struggle. Much more fundamental to their position was their own (not MT's) view of consciousness. Their perspective is very similar, though by no means identical, to and derived from the perspectives of C.L.R. James, Marty Glaberman and the Facing Reality tendency. This view held that the working class already had some sort of socialist consciousness or an embryonic form of that consciousness. They saw militant, spontaneous actions as evidence of the class' desire for a new society in its resistance to the old. The implications of this for practice are that revolutionaries should not try to educate the class; that was unnecessary for the class had all the consciousness it needed. The job was to give tactical aid and encourage more militant actions so that organization and theory would emerge spontaneously from the "class in motion." After all, who are we to tell the working class what to do? The class will decide what it needs when it needs it.

This view led this tendency to propose that the newspaper cut out all the analysis and just give more news, tactical hints, and general exhortations to action. At the workplace, this group didn't see the need to set up any formal organizational structures as they were thought to be inherently authoritarian, and destructive of self activity. Social circles and spontaneous actions were the base of this approach and in fact the sum of this approach.

The real motion from this tendency came in their abandonment of the workplace focus. This, directly related to their anti-union and anti-organization attitudes, gave them no strategy for the workplace.

The center also abandoned the workplace priority and argued against all priorities, especially male, old left ones. On the whole, however, the center refused to take positions on the priorities arguing that we couldn't know anything with any degree of certainty at this point, given the limited extent of our practice. Theory was important yes, but it wasn't something that we raise our voices over within the collective. Right up until the bitter end, the center continued to empirically propose projects to hold the group together when it was more than obvious that only collectively understood politics could do that.

The other pole that emerged (and whose views this paper reflects) held to the workplace orientation that had always characterized MT, but began to move on the all-important trade union question. The experience at the electrical plant mentioned above was very important in conditioning the motion on this point. It showed the importance of program, and intervention in the union and how destructive ignoring them was to the very self activity that the group saw as so important. It began to look for a larger framework with which to take up these questions concretely.

This tendency also moved on the question of leadership and the vanguard. It had seen in the MT collective and the electrical factory how the lack of leadership and clear programmatic directions for struggle merely reinforced and increased the differences in development already present. The function of leadership is to develop more leadership, more participation. Denying the validity of this role means refusing to recognize the uneven development in the working class and the left. Furthermore, it means refusing to take responsibility for lessening this unevenness.

Consciousness was seen as something that developed in struggles where there was constant interplay of action and analysis. This had been the general MT position, but this tendency wanted to take this slogan out of the realm of the abstract and concretize it in a way that had been impossible in the fairly empirical circles of MT%

In summary then, the four of us emerged from the MT experience with a firm commitment to workplace organizing that stressed the need for programmatic struggle within the trade unions. We retained the Modern Times emphasis on socialism from below and the necessity for building a rank and file workers' movement - not a bureaucratic one. We were also seeking to be part of something larger than the small collective we had been in. The local framework of our practice had cramped our development and narrowed our vision. The workers' movement itself couldn't be a local one - it had to have a national framework. Having come to these positions, we looked to see if there was a national organization which shared these perspectives and was in motion at building a movement from them.

TOWARD THE IS

Now, of course, we didn't suddenly go shopping for an organization. We had been considering the question of national organization for some time. The lessons of our practice and the emerging differences in the group made it increasingly clear that MT was no longer a viable framework for our work.

We had been in contact with the IS for a good while. Some members of our tendency had known the organization for almost four years. Others had come to know it through their working in MT.

There had always been a general agreement between MT and IS on the question of socialism from below. The general statement that IS stands for "... a revolution from below, controlled by the working class and aimed at a democratic rule over all social institutions..." is quite compatible with similar MT statements. Furthermore IS and MT both took this out of the realm of the abstract in their oppositions to the bureaucratic practices of the "socialist" societies existing today. Both MT and IS were not to be numbered among those who "oppose the destruction of workers' democracy everywhere except where it happens."

Once you went past these generalities, MT and IS parted company. MT, as we have said earlier, took socialism from below to mean the denial of the role of a vanguard for revolutionaries and it had little to say on the question of leadership or class organization in general. We still see the concept of "socialism from below" as antithetical to manipulative, substitutionist style of work that has characterized so much of the history of traditional "vanguards." This has always been IS' position.

What we learned from our practice was that the lack of a clear program in the struggles of the class will be fatal everytime. Revolutionaries should provide a clear working class program of struggle and aid in the development of the emerging class leadership. Revolutionary organization will not just drop from the sky when the upsurge appears. It will be the result of years of struggle by those consciously committed to building it from within the struggles of the class. The task then becomes one of finding a democratic organizational structure and style of functioning to do this in.

The internal functioning and internal political life of IS are the best examples we've seen of this. While it was by no means perfect, the recent IS convention was centered around debate and discussion of various positions. The procedures for publishing resolutions, offering amendments, debate on the floor, etc., gave a good structural framework for democratic functioning.

Discussion and debate are seen as normal and necessary functions in a healthy organization. Members are guaranteed space to publish positions in the regular discussion bulletins. Ultimately, there are no structural measures that can guarantee democracy within any organization; only an insistent membership can do that.

RANK AND FILE STRUGGLE

The concept of socialism from below takes the notion of building a rank and file movement as more than just a tactical perspective. It relates directly to the necessity for building the self-consciousness and self-confidence of the working class through its own struggles.

The process of building a revolutionary organization must be one that is integral to the development of the workers' movement, not something that takes place in sectarian isolation from these struggles.

Here again, MT and IS agreed on the general attitude but differed fundamentally on how this was to be translated into action. As we said above, our practice led us to realize that such a struggle cannot avoid the trade unions. It must, in fact, see them as the main strategic priority.

But what is possible in trade union struggles? Is it possible for the rank and file to win control of their unions? Frankly, if they can't, they are never going to make a revolution or manage a socialist society. But what is possible in a union controlled by the rank and file? Well, trade unions are not revolutionary organizations - no one has said they are. They are also not just simply institutions for the economic struggle of the working class with the political being left to the party. This hue of reasoning has often been used to justify economic trade union work.

We believe that trade unions can be made to pursue class struggle policies by a conscious and organized rank and file movement. This will be a tremendous step forward for the working class movement. What goes on in the labor movement energizes the entire class and can create that sense of possibility that makes revolutionary socialism a mass issue.

But even a democratic rank and file controlled union activity on class struggle principles may be forced to compromise or may be defeated by a more powerful capitalist class. A class struggle union is not a collaborationist union and we think this difference has enormous implications for the development of the working class movement. But it is still a trade union. It can only go so far in the social framework of which it is a part and even then, only under the right condition.

As revolutionary socialists we have to push the unions right up to those limits. In doing so we can develop the consciousness, organization and fighting strength of the class. We're also going to develop the consciousness of those very limits. Because we're not syndicalist we know we need a class-wide revolutionary socialist organization - a revolutionary party. But we believe that the process in which this party is created is crucial in determining the nature of that party.

The present crisis of the system has further heightened the necessity for rank and file opposition in the trade unions. The need for a fighting labor movement to defend the standard of living and working conditions of the class has put new emphasis on the problems of union democracy and state intervention. The crisis

and the problems it has aggravated aren't going away. As revolutionary socialists we can't abstain from the fight within the trade unions or let it be conducted along a politically economist line. We propose a class struggle approach to the struggle in the trade unions that will form a bridge from trade union practice to revolutionary politics.

CLASS STRUGGLE UNIONISM

As Marxists, we believe that our world view enables us to see more clearly the nature of the conflict and fight more successfully. Class struggle unionism attempts to translate our basic Marxist concepts into trade union language and action so that we might be able to politically influence the emerging layer of militant workers we are presently hoping to reach - and through them a far broader sector of the class.

In their most abbreviated form (and we urge our readers to read the soon to be published document on class struggle unionism which lays this out in a more complete form) the basic principles of class struggle unionism upon which we base our approach are:

1) Class struggle policy: The most basic idea of Marxism is the class exploitation of the proletariat through the extraction of surplus value. For the capitalists, labor power is just a commodity to be bought at the minimum wage socially required to maintain and reproduce a productive proletariat. Translated into union terms, this means that working people only get what we fight for and only hold onto what the boss is afraid to take away. Our desire for a decent life for ourselves and our families, both on and off the job, conflicts with the bosses' insistence on the greatest possible profit. Workers and bosses have basically conflicting interests. For this reason there can be no peace between them. A class struggle union policy is one that can recognize these basic facts and understands that the main purpose of a union is to strengthen the position of workers in our fight with the bosses.

The class collaborationists who now run our unions preach the opposite. They try to tell us that we and our bosses have basically the same interests. The job of a union, according to them, is to avoid conflict and bring about labor peace. When conflicts do arise, they feel the union and the company should try and find out who is to blame. If workers are in violation of the contract, the union helps the company bring them back into line. The only kind of struggle the collaborationists consider to be legitimate are ones that follow the procedure laid out in the contract.

We believe that the worker is always right, the company always wrong. We view the contract as nothing more than a written truce in the class war. If we can violate the contract to our advantage and get away with it, we will. After all that is how the boss plays the game with us. When we obey the contract it is out of respect for the power of the company, not out of any normal obligation. Our only interest in the contract is to use it to the advantage of the worker.

2) Rank and file approach: Another basic idea of Marxism is that the emancipation of the proletariat is the task of the proletariat - the working class advances only through self-activity, self-awareness, and self-confidence. A union is strong only when the membership as a body is strong. The main job of union leadership is to keep the membership informed, educated and aware. They should always be seeking to instill in the membership an understanding that it must remain active, vigilant, confident, united, and ready to fight.

Class struggle unionists refuse to get confused or lost in the maze of official procedures and red tape, but merely use the procedures as one tactical part of a total approach. This is the opposite of the bureaucratic and elitist approach of the collaborationists.

3) Workers' Control: Marxists understand that it is the struggle against capital that prepares workers, as a class, to rule. Trade unions should become schools for socialism. The main reason why we as workers organize ourselves into unions is to fight for more control over our own lives. This is the reason we fight for higher wages and benefits. This is why we fight for humane working conditions. In every area, we as a collective group fight to limit and push back the prerogatives of management and to increase our freedom and initiative as workers. The notion of workers' control and that of democratic unionism go hand in hand. We can't use our union to fight for more control over our lives unless we control the union itself. And workers who democratically control a union will use it to gain more control over their lives as workers.

4) Class solidarity: Marxists believe that the interests of workers as a class supersede all individual, sectional, and parochial interests. We translate this into trade union terms as class solidarity. Every victory of workers advances the struggles of all workers--every defeat sets us back. We fight for solidarity among all working people: those seeking work as well as those working, those not yet organized into unions as well as those who are, working people of all countries as well as all American workers.

5) Champion liberation, support all struggles against oppression: Marxists understand that capitalists use special oppression to divide and weaken the working class. Special oppression pits white workers against black, male against female, one national group against another, one religion against another. These divisions weaken, confuse, and misdirect the struggles of the class. What is needed is united action, but we understand that effective fighting unity cannot be achieved between workers of oppressed groups and workers of the dominant groups on the basis any acceptance of social inequality. No part of the labor movement can expect the support of workers who are subject to special oppression if it goes along with that oppression and refuses to lead a fight against it.

6) Labor's need for our own party: As Marxists, we understand that the basic defense and advancement of working class interests requires a political as well as an economic response. The fight for the principles of class struggle unionism in the trade unions is not only important for winning economic gains. It is at the same time a political challenge to capital. Yet this challenge must be placed in a more conscious and class-wide form. It is ultimately in the political struggle that the most fundamental class questions can be raised and fought for. The movement to improve the economic position of workers must follow its own dynamics and become a self-conscious political movement. We call for and will fight for a party which will embody this awareness and will consistently champion the interests of the working class. We understand in advance that no reformist labor party can do this. We don't call for a reformist labor party. Our fight against collaborationism in the trade unions carries over into a fight against reformism in the realm of politics.

Our unions are already involved in politics. Usually this takes the form of supporting Democratic Party candidates, though occasionally a Republican may garner the accolade, "friend of labor". It also involves spending our dues money on massive lobbying efforts to get bills passed which are supposedly in our interests. Our role is simply to "vot for labor endorsed candidates" or write our congressman. In a system as corrupt as ours that is little choice indeed. The entire political stress of our unions is that we, the members, play a totally passive

role to make it easier for the political control of money and power--their own included--to function more smoothly.

This conception of politics as "out of our hands" must be abolished. The labor party is a form appropriate to this transformation of politics and flows directly from the struggle to control our working lives through a transformation of the trade unions.

7) An organized class struggle movement: As Marxists, we understand that political objectives can best be accomplished through organization. We argue to workers that it will take an organized class struggle movement to effectively lead a fight to rebuild our unions and redefine our political system. We concretize this by fighting for local and national caucuses and for the need to win them to policies and programs based on class struggle principles. We also raise the idea for a broader class struggle movement to connect workers from different unions, unorganized workers, unemployed workers, black, minority, feminist, and community organizations. Without generating illusions about the speed at which this can happen, these are the tasks we pose.

The implementation of these principles demands the industrialization of members and their becoming active in the shop floor and trade union struggles at their workplaces. It means building local groups at work. It also means breaking out of the local framework as well and building national rank and file opposition movements within the international unions. It means establishing networks of militants in the various industries. It looks beyond this to cross-industry organization of worker-activists who agree with the principles of class struggle unionism. These are the kind of strategic organizational steps that can lead to the formation of genuine (not sectarian) working class revolutionary organization.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGY

That, in short, is the basic IS strategy for building a workers movement and a revolutionary party. The next question we had was, what was the organization doing about implementing it? Was that organization capable of the task?

The industrialization of the membership has been progressing steadily and will increase with the recruitment of industrialized radicals that is presently occurring. The Cleveland branch has managed to put three quarters of its members in priority areas in the first year of its existence.

The question of priority areas is a vital one. It enables the organization to more effectively put its strategy into practice and test it. Most national organizations don't have a clear industrial strategy or clear priorities within that strategy and their work suffers from it. Yet the concentration of efforts into priority areas provides the successes or fruitful failures in practice that further develop that strategy in light of the experience of the organization. This is the process we see going on in IS today. (The priorities, we might note, will expand as the organization grows and has more human resources to allocate.)

Establishing roots in the workplace is where it all begins. Taking part in shop floor struggles, union affairs, becoming known as a militant "radical", linking up with other militants in the plant, getting a group together, putting out a shop paper, explaining your "radicalism" and so on -- these things take time, but they can't be sidestepped. All the correct programs in the world are meaningless however if they aren't active elements in concrete struggles. This is basic to IS's rank and file, class struggle approach and its practice.

Beyond that, a systematic effort is being made to develop a nation-wide net-

work of industrial contacts, worker militants, etc. Members spend a good amount of time travelling to talk with people from x rank and file group, or bring someone from y group to meet with x group. This work (especially in Auto, Trucking, and more recently in the Coalition of Labor Union Women and Steel) lays the basis for a more conscious development of national rank and file movements in various industries as well as organization that crosses industrial lines. It is essential to the political development of the rank and file movement that such steps to make it more conscious and consciously organized be taken. The national orientation also raises the level of issues and politics beyond the local focus that they often assume and poses the question of organization much more sharply.

IS has also related to existing national rank and file organizations and caucuses. These groups (especially United National Caucus in Auto, Teamsters United Rank and File in Trucking, United Action in Telephone, more recently CLUW and Rank and File Team in Steel) fell far short of having a class struggle approach, but a principled and non-sectarian relationship was maintained.

At present IS is planning to launch a series of journals in Auto, Teamsters, and CLUW aimed at bringing a class struggle approach to the concrete situations in various industries and areas. These journals are another part of the process of nurturing the rank and file movement. IS has also been sponsoring rank and file educational conferences around the country as part of this same strategy.

Workers' Power, the national paper of the organization, has developed into a real organizing tool in many of the ways we hoped Modern Times would and did function. It is a paper for worker-militants that one can read without an English-Marxist dictionary and develop a class struggle view from. It steers clear of the sectarian gibberish of some papers and avoids the overly simplistic optimism of the united front papers.

At this point, we'd like to thank all of you who managed to wade this far through what is certainly not one of the most exciting or vital documents in the history of the international working class movement, but we feel it is important to try and come to terms with our own experiences and learn from them what we can.

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