

# **Road Maps, Dead Ends, and the Search for Fresh Ground: How Can We Build the Socialist Movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?**

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*“It is easy for good to triumph over evil, if only angels will get organized along the lines of the Mafia.” – Kurt Vonnegut*

For the past seven-plus years I have devoted much of my life to effort to build a socialist movement in the United States. As a member of one of the many tiny socialist groups on the U.S. left, I have organized dozens of anti-war, labor solidarity, immigrant rights, and other rallies and campaigns. I have toured the country to speak at college campuses about socialism. I have set up numerous study groups and conferences and written and edited hundreds of articles for socialist publications. Most people might say, “Dan, you’re crazy if you think that socialism can be achieved in a country like the United States!” But despite the challenges, I hope to continue doing this for the next 50 or so years.

Lately, though, I’ve started to wonder just how the &\*\$ a viable socialist movement can actually be built in the U.S. I’ve been grappling with this question for much of the last year as I attempt to overcome a funk rooted in my sense that the current organizational forms of the socialist movement, to which I and many others have given so much of our time and energy, are a dead end. Recently it seems like every time I try to raise a finger to help the movement, I am overcome by a crippling sense of the futility of it all.

My paralysis does not stem from pessimism about the possibilities for social change in the U.S. Rather, it is rooted in frustrations with the current methods of organization dominant in the socialist movement, methods which make a difficult task even harder – if not impossible. I can’t shake the feeling that despite our best intentions, we are wasting resources by taking roads that lead to nowhere. It doesn’t help that the main form of organization – tiny, competing groups divided by marginal differences – is

out of tune with the content of our aims – “the full material and spiritual liberation of the toilers.” I’ve come to feel that all the heroic effort in the world cannot invest inherently barren forms with meaning.

This piece is my attempt to stimulate critical thinking about the way forward for the U.S. socialist movement. I hope that it will be of interest to practicing socialists as well as other progressive activists, because I think that a healthy, attractive socialist movement can help contribute to the rebuilding of a broader and more powerful left. I realize I am not the first person to say what is written below, and there is much that remains unexplored and unanswered. But I hope it will lead to a productive and collaborative discussion that might open new possibilities for anti-capitalist organizing.

### **The Crisis**

Ten years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we face a series of crises – economic, environmental, and beyond – rooted in the capitalist profit system. Yet the real crisis in this country, as Naomi Klein put it, “comes from the fact that there isn’t a real left.”<sup>1</sup> Without a vibrant, powerful left – or even the semblance of one – there seems to be no alternative to what is on offer from our corporate and governing elite.

An outside observer might suppose this should be a historic time for the socialist movement. The global economic crisis has discredited capitalism in the minds of millions. A poll by Rasmussen in April 2009 found that only 53% of Americans favor capitalism over socialism, with the under-30 crowd nearly evenly split in its support. Add to this Glenn Beck’s paranoid ranting about the Obama administration’s crypto-socialism, which makes it seem like there’s a socialist around every corner, and you might get the impression that socialists were gaining some serious traction.

Unfortunately, this atmosphere has translated into few appreciable gains for the socialist movement. Sure, there have been a few national TV appearances and op-eds by socialists in important newspapers (and Beck has even read some socialist groups’ “What We Stand For” programs on his show).<sup>2</sup> But the dirty secret is that there are probably just

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<sup>1</sup> Naomi Klein, “Building a Real Left,” <<http://www.commondreams.org/video/2010/09/14>>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, an editorial by the co-chair of the Socialist Party USA in the Washington Post: Billy Wharton, “Obama’s No Socialist. I Should Know,” <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/13/AR2009031301899.html>>.

a few thousand organized socialists in the U.S. today. That number includes people of widely varying levels of commitment and experience. And “organized” is a generous term, as we are divided into dozens of tiny, squabbling organizations. Outside of Beck’s mind, I’m sorry to say, socialists have unfortunately little influence.

This isn’t to demean the important work being done by socialist groups across the country. Socialists have played critical roles in recent movements ranging from LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights to the anti-war movement, providing dedicated organizers as well as political leadership. At the same time, they continue publishing socialist literature, organizing meetings and study groups, and trying to educate a new generation of Marxists. The socialists organizing today are some of the most dedicated, self-sacrificing people you will ever meet – people who should be praised by anyone wishing for a better world, rather than laughed at as hopeless dreamers or criticized from the sidelines.<sup>3</sup>

Yet this work is far from enough, as most practicing socialists are all too well aware. The question is whether more can be done, or whether the weakness of the movement today is an inevitable outcome of the period we are in. Despite growing frustrations with capitalism around the globe, this is a difficult period for the left. The past two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union have seen an accelerated ideological offensive proclaiming socialism impossible. There is no denying that the road ahead for socialists will be an arduous one.

But as U.S. socialist James Cannon once said, “The art of politics is knowing what to do next.” My contention is that we can take steps today to make the socialist movement healthier and more attractive, positioning it to grow and win the best activists to its ranks in the years ahead. Objectively, capitalism’s crisis poses a serious need for a powerful socialist alternative, without which the relentless logic of the system will continue to assert itself. Growing numbers are coming to recognize that the problems facing humanity – from poverty to wars to environmental disaster to sexism and racism – are systemic, even if that does not immediately lead them to join an organization. Our task is to reach these people and show them a movement that is capable of playing a role

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<sup>3</sup> For an international example, see the comments on the positive role played by socialists in Britain recently, “In Praise of the Far Left,” <<http://averypublicsociologist.blogspot.com/2010/12/in-praise-of-far-left.html>>.

in changing society. Most importantly, this process will involve critically assessing the organizational forms of today's socialist movement and launching a deep discussion on how to overcome the sectarian forms of organization and the sectarian thinking to which they give rise.

What we do right now matters. As Hal Draper wrote nearly 40 years ago, "For us American socialists today who look forward to the building of a genuine socialist movement, there is a course we can take which will further this objective and bring it nearer, which will fructify the ground on which it will arise, which will make it easier for its elements to mature from place to place." Yet Draper also warned, "The course taken now by American socialists can also have the opposite effect: of turning off dispositions toward a genuine movement; of sterilizing the ground on which the seeds of the movement might germinate; of making it harder for workers to find their way to a socialist movement-in-the-making."<sup>4</sup>

### **Problems of the Sect Form**

It might be useful to first lay out the current terrain of U.S. socialism. What exists today is a variety of tiny groups, often disparagingly referred to as "sects." I have usually taken offense to the use of this term to refer to almost every group; it makes it sound like they are all distanced from reality and more interested in building their own organizations than a broader movement. Some groups labeled "sects" are much better than others; there is a vast distance between the Spartacist League<sup>5</sup> and groups like Socialist Alternative or the International Socialist Organization (as the Sparts always take pains to point out). But increasingly, I feel that it might be a fair term, though I will try to avoid it as much as

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<sup>4</sup> Hal Draper, "The Anatomy of the Micro-Sect," <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1973/xx/microsect.htm>>.

<sup>5</sup> The Spartacist League is the publisher of the newspaper *Workers' Vanguard*, which is mainly filled with vitriolic attacks on other socialist organizations. One of my friends in Socialist Alternative asked a Spart why they keep showing up at our events to deliver long-winded speeches denouncing, for example, our German sister organization's bad position on Michael Jackson's sex trial, even if they never recruit any of our members. Their response: "At least we can try to demoralize you and make you drop out of the movement." The government couldn't set up an organization that would make the socialist movement look less attractive.

possible, given that it has entirely negative connotations which are not fair to socialist activists today.<sup>6</sup>

Nearly all socialist groups today are basically walled off from one another, mutually impermeable in terms of ideas and coordinated work. The limited exceptions to this statement only prove the rule. Each duplicates similar activities, from publishing a newspaper (the be-all and end-all for socialist groups, often drawing on a misreading of Lenin which I will address below), to organizing meetings on the case for socialism, to coordinating study groups, and on and on.

Until very recently, I was a member of one of these tiny socialist groups, Socialist Alternative. Internationally, Socialist Alternative is in solidarity with the Committee for a Workers' International, which includes groups like us in about forty other countries. Other groups on the socialist left in the U.S. include the International Socialist Organization, Solidarity, the Socialist Party, the Freedom Socialist Party, the Socialist Equality Party, Socialist Appeal, Socialist Action, Socialist Organizer, two versions of the Freedom Road Socialist Organization, the Party for Socialism and Liberation, the Workers' World Party, Labor's Militant Voice, the Socialist Workers' Party, the still-existing Communist Party USA, the Revolutionary Communist Party, and plenty of others (my sincere apologies if I left your group out).

The existence of all these groups always comes off as strange to those outside the movement, so it's worth explaining why someone might join one and not the others. I joined Socialist Alternative nearly eight years ago, immediately after the invasion of Iraq. I had heard a speaker from our Nigerian sister party speak six months earlier and make a compelling case for international socialism, which was strengthened by the fact that he had been one of the leaders of the massive general strikes against fuel price hikes in Nigeria. So he wasn't just a talker, but clearly someone who represented an organization with ideas that were actually able to reach people and mobilize them into action. Given the patronizing attitude of many liberal American activists toward Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and working people generally – either that they need to be saved, or that their struggles are different than ours and all we can do is cheerlead them rather than have a

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<sup>6</sup> As Hal Draper wrote, "To Marx, any organization was a sect if it set up any special set of views (including Marx's views) as its organizational boundary; if it made this special set of views the determinant of its organizational form."

genuine dialogue about strategies and tactics – I found it immensely attractive to be in an organization that included serious working-class activists from around the globe.

Still, it took months of convincing before I joined. I wasn't sure why I should join any particular socialist group or what I would get out of it. I had been extremely active in the anti-war and student-labor movements, including the Harvard Living Wage Campaign, which culminated in a sit-in in 2001 that brought the richest university in the world to its knees. Sure, I agreed with everything I read, but I was always asking – “what do you guys do?” It became clearer to me how socialist ideas could help build mass movements after I read books like Farrell Dobbs' *Teamster Rebellion*, about the Trotskyist-led Minneapolis Teamsters' strikes of 1934. And with the start of the war in Iraq, it was clear that this entire system (capitalism) was intolerable, and I needed to get involved in an organization pledged to overthrowing it.

I was attracted to Socialist Alternative in particular because, in contrast to the student activist groups I was involved in, it included workers among its leadership, and emphasized that the working class was the key force in changing society. I also agreed with the decision to support Ralph Nader's campaign for president in 2000 from a socialist perspective (the first protest I had ever attended was a rally outside the 2000 presidential debates protesting the exclusion of Nader), which seemed like a no-brainer: if you want to build a mass socialist movement, it's going to first and foremost require a break from the two-party corporate dictatorship over U.S. politics. Further, Socialist Alternative didn't trace their ideological allegiance back to Stalin or Mao, whose appeal I've always struggled to understand (not to mention that the groups that looked to them as leaders always turned me off for other reasons, although I'm open to learning about them in the future with less hostile eyes). And they weren't crazy (“ultra-left” being the kinder word usually employed), unlike some on the Boston left. Instead, Socialist Alternative's methods seemed capable of translating socialism into a force that could actually be grasped by millions of workers and youth. That I was joining an organization of just 150 or so people didn't bother me too much, since every social movement starts small. Besides, what other choice do you have if you want to build the socialist movement today?

In retrospect, I'm glad that I made the decision to join. But with time I've grown more and more skeptical that any currently existing socialist group is going about organizing the right way. In fact, I increasingly feel that the socialist movement today has more to do with play-acting out some vision of the past than dealing with the complex questions that face us in the present. The organizational forms the movement takes today do a lot to contribute to this problem, and deserve a critical assessment by anyone considering devoting their life to the struggle for radical transformation.

### **Visions from the Past**

To accuse socialists of “play-acting out some vision of the past” sounds harsh, so it's worth elaborating on what I mean. I believe that our visions of how the movement was built in the past allow many to accept the puny size of our organizations today. We know – or *think* we know – from studying history, that tiny, embattled forces have on numerous occasions grown to lead popular, socialist revolutions. To give two commonly drawn upon examples: Didn't the Bolsheviks start out from a miniscule core of exiles, Plekhanov, Zasulich, and Axelrod? And wasn't it said that you could fit the entire anti-war, revolutionary socialist left (the Zimmerwaldists) after the outbreak of World War I into two stagecoaches? Yet it was their dogged adherence to the correct program that enabled them to eventually win the allegiance of millions and lead the first successful workers' revolution in the world, in Russia. But are these comparisons historically correct? The Zimmerwald left, after all, represented figures who had once had the allegiance of millions, and would soon again.<sup>7</sup>

This type of pioneering attitude has its positive side: it's the spirit necessary to get movements off the ground and push onward through difficult times. But it shouldn't be a replacement for serious thinking. While history should be a source of moral support, we also need to scrupulously study it to draw lessons for our struggles today. Socialist groups strive to be the “historical memory of the working class” and spend tremendous amounts of time and effort studying history. Unfortunately, many of our readings of the past are quite flawed.

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<sup>7</sup> A friend who heard these same examples when he was a member of Socialist Action confirms my suspicion that these examples are used widely, in many different groups.

For a lot of groups, the Bolsheviks still provide a model, and the writings of Lenin are drawn upon to help provide some guidance on questions of revolutionary organization. Others in the movement have rejected “Leninism.” Yet there is a widespread misunderstanding of what “Leninism” (as practiced by Lenin and co.) actually was.<sup>8</sup>

Today, Lenin is often brought out by groups seeking to justify the existence of their own tiny organizations. We often cite his statement that “without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.”<sup>9</sup> In particular, Lenin warned, a correct revolutionary theory was important for a young movement, one just getting going – while an incorrect theory could weaken the movement for years to come. In many readings by the left, he becomes the original splitter (a reading re-emphasized by a superficial understanding of the Bolshevik-Menshevik rift in 1903).

Referring to these types of quotes is reassuring when you are trying to provide a rationale for your tiny group’s existence. The need to uphold the proper revolutionary theory (or “line”) gives a historic mission to groups of 150 – or 50, or 20, or even 5. But it relies upon a complete misunderstanding of what Lenin wrote.<sup>10</sup> Lenin’s overarching goal was to build a party that was capable of sinking deep roots in the Russian working class, one that would draw together the most active and thinking workers and activists into common action. This is what is meant by the oft-disparaged term “vanguard party.” The quote about revolutionary theory is from the polemic *What Is To Be Done?* in which Lenin was arguing for a mass party along the lines of the German Social Democrats (SPD). It was not written to justify the existence of a tiny sect, as it seems to be routinely used today.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For a good example of the rethinking of what Leninism actually was, see Paul Kellogg, “Leninism: It’s Not What You Think,” <<http://links.org.au/node/1407>>.

<sup>9</sup> Lenin, *What is to be Done?*

<sup>10</sup> For a thought-provoking recent attempt to explain Lenin’s real project, see the work of Marxist scholar Lars Lih, for example, his lengthy book *Lenin Rediscovered: ‘What is to be Done?’ in Context*. 2006. For a shorter piece by Lih, see “Scotching the Myths About Lenin’s ‘What is to be Done?’”: <<http://links.org.au/node/1953>>.

<sup>11</sup> For example, here is a quote from Alan Woods, the leader of the International Marxist Tendency, and author of a generally excellent book on the Bolshevik Party, *Bolshevism: The Road to Revolution*: “The central task facing the US Marxists is the building of a revolutionary party. And it is impossible to build a revolutionary party without revolutionary theory. Many groups exist in the USA and internationally that claim to stand for Marxism in one way or another, but they fail on two basic questions: 1) the need to fight for theoretical clarity and 2) the need to link up with the mass movement of the working class. A notable

In fact, Lenin's key point in writings like "Where to Begin?" and *What Is To Be Done?* was not about doctrinal purity. Rather, it was about the implications of the political mistakes of the economists, whom he accused of "endeavoring to clip and narrow the work of political organization and agitation."<sup>12</sup> He felt that the workers of Russia would respond to exposures of all forms of oppression, not just those that affected their immediate economic interests – if only the message would get to them, in the right form. He wanted to reach more people, on more issues, with good material, and thus called for a single national newspaper to unite the many disparate groups and provide a focus for their work.<sup>13</sup> He drew bold organizational conclusions, writing, "The immediate task of our Party is . . . to call for the formation of a revolutionary organization capable of uniting all forces and guiding the movement in actual practice and not in name alone, that is, an organization ready at any time to support every protest and every outbreak and use it to build up and consolidate the fighting forces suitable for the decisive struggle."<sup>14</sup>

It is important to recognize the context in which all this was written: the dramatic advances in the Russian workers' movement, along with a growing groundswell of society-wide protest against the tsarist regime. The groundwork for such a revolutionary organization (and to some extent for the workers' protests) had been laid by the local socialist circles that developed in the 1890s, and by the propaganda efforts of Marxists like Plekhanov and co. even earlier – as well as the heroism of the youth of the Russian intelligentsia who sought to find a road to the people in the 1870s and 1880s. We in the United States today are in an entirely different situation from that in which Lenin and other turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionaries were writing and organizing, a period that globally featured major working-class struggles and mass socialist political parties. The immediate tasks of American socialists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must stem from the specific conditions facing us right now. Nonetheless, since Lenin is drawn on so much, and since

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exception is the WIL, which shares the ideas, program and traditions of the International Marxist Tendency." Search the website of any socialist group, and you will find similarly shallow justifications for their separate existence.

<sup>12</sup> Lenin, "Where to Begin?"

<sup>13</sup> In the early 1910s, Lenin would reject calls by Trotsky and others for a "non-factional newspaper," which he deemed impossible and in fact harmful given the fundamental disagreements between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks over revolutionary strategy. See, for example, "How P.B. Axelrod Exposes the Liquidators," <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1912/jul/29.htm>>. The point is to understand Lenin's flexible tactics in their proper context.

<sup>14</sup> Lenin, "Where to Begin?"

I still think he (and other classical Marxists) have a lot to teach us, it is worth understanding what he wrote. It's also important to recognize that for all his abilities to size up concrete situations and develop tactics flowing from them, he was quite consistent throughout his career as a Marxist in the type of movement he aimed to develop.<sup>15</sup> I will return to this more later to address Lenin's thoughts on the socialist press.

The question today is how to lay the groundwork for the eventual development of a powerful socialist movement in the U.S. Many who are new to the movement often quickly ask why all the existing socialist groups can't just get together and build a united organization, or at least work more closely together. The usual answers are that the differences between the groups are too great to justify uniting. Even if a number of groups all came together, it would just result in a still small grouping burdened by even worse infighting than exists today. Plus, each group believes it is the embodiment of the true Marxist program and methods, which it must preserve and defend against other groups. Louis Proyect, moderator of the Marxmail list and a former member of the Socialist Workers' Party, explains how he was initially impressed with the explanations given to him (back in the late '60s) by a more experienced socialist for why so many groups exist: "He said that the experience of observing the left from afar is a little bit like looking at a man in the distance whose image is cloaked by fire and sparks and the violent strikes he is applying to an unseen object that result in harsh clanging sounds. From afar, he looks like a madman engaged in some bizarre activity. But when you come close, you can see that he is the village blacksmith simply doing productive work. This is exactly what polemical struggle looks like to the neophyte."<sup>16</sup> As much as I think that political clarity is key, I've come to share Proyect's conclusion that perhaps the neophytes' skepticism is correct after all.

The usual response to these concerns is that regroupment efforts will have to await the development of broader struggles, in which groups will have the opportunity to work together more broadly in common action and be able to test out their points of agreement. In the meantime, it's argued, efforts to force socialists to unite are premature

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<sup>15</sup> See Lars Lih, "'We Must Dare to Dream': Echoes of *What is to be Done?* in Lenin's Later Career," <<http://links.org.au/node/1980>>.

<sup>16</sup> Louis Proyect, "Why Are There So Many Socialist Groups?," <<http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2010/05/10/why-are-there-so-many-socialist-groups/>>.

and run the risk of actually setting the movement back. Yet after nearly eight years of socialist activism, I have come, for a variety of reasons that I will outline below, to believe that the most urgent task we face is figuring out how to overcome the divisions that exist within the movement and build a common, united organization of some sort.

### **How to Advance Revolutionary Theory and Socialist Ideas**

This isn't to say that questions of theory, or the disagreements that exist today, are of minor importance. Lenin was correct when he said that "without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." In other words, without a scientific understanding that the crises we face today are an inevitable outcome of the capitalist system, that the contradictions of capitalism cannot be reformed out of existence, and that fundamental, systemic change is necessary, the movement's focus will be on the dead-end of reformism, fruitlessly attempting to patch up the system.<sup>17</sup> The question then is how socialists actually can advance revolutionary theory and support for socialist ideas today.

The current model relies upon each individual socialist group training its members in its version of "revolutionary theory" and attempting to transmit this to the world. "Revolutionary theory," as far as I can tell, is usually very narrowly defined as the program and methods of a specific tiny group. The key is to develop a core of people who understand these ideas – "cadre." As Proyect describes it, "This is the 'nucleus' theory of party building – develop case-hardened 'cadre' like the nucleus of some element, like carbon or uranium. When a catalyst is applied, like heat or the class struggle, the masses will accumulate around the nucleus like electrons. That's the theory anyhow."<sup>18</sup> However, this is quite problematic in reality. While it's better than nothing, walling ourselves off in our own groups and focusing on reading our own limited material is a severely flawed method. Instead, the movement desperately needs more debate, debate which transcends organizational lines, and that will challenge activists and bring a new level of theoretical seriousness, as well as the potential for expected qualitative

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<sup>17</sup> See Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution*.

<sup>18</sup> Proyect, "Why Are There So Many Socialist Groups?"

breakthroughs. This seems a much better idea than smugly sealing ourselves off, content that we have the right ideas – even if they are unlikely to ever really reach anyone.

Lenin wrote that “the role of an advanced fighter can only be fulfilled by a party guided by an advanced theory.” By “advanced theory,” he didn’t just mean a general agreement with the basic principles of socialism. Rather, as he wrote (in a fit of exuberance), “To have some concrete idea of what this means, let the reader recall such forerunners of Russian Social Democracy as Herzen, Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and the brilliant galaxy of revolutionaries of the seventies; let him remember the world significance that Russian literature has now acquired; let him . . . but let that suffice!”<sup>19</sup> I include that quote because it serves to emphasize the wide gap between the pretensions of socialists today to be building off the traditions of the past, and the reality of that history. I think we routinely miss out on the broad scope of what Lenin and others conceived. Of course, we cannot just will such a movement or even theory or literature into existence. But hopefully we can help to create the grounds on which it can develop.

This means more of an effort to promote dialogue, debate, and sharing of ideas within the entire socialist movement, to most effectively train socialist activists, thinkers, and writers. As Engels wrote, “It is the responsibility of the leaders to enlighten themselves more and more in theoretical issues, to liberate themselves more and more from the influence of traditional phrases that belong to the old worldview and to always keep in mind that from the time it became scientific, socialism demands to be treated as a science, that is, that it must be studied.”<sup>20</sup> The advance of this science, and the development of scientific socialists, is limited not just by the period we are in but also by our organizational forms, which impoverish our thought. This doesn’t have to mean reading everything by Slavoj Žižek or burying ourselves in an ultra-academic approach to theory. It means being able to explain the way the world works and to present Marxism in a popular fashion. That involves a lot of hard work, critical thinking, and discussion, which is hard to get inside the currently existing groups, given their limited memberships and resources.

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<sup>19</sup> Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*

<sup>20</sup> Engels, quoted in *What Is To Be Done?*, 699.

There are some websites that exist to promote this type of discussion, but they are a far cry from what is needed, and have a tendency to attract armchair socialists. The discussion forum *Revleft.com* appears to be filled with these types, people who are always prepared to hurl accusations of reformism at anyone engaged in real-world activism that goes beyond the pale of sterile socialist propagandizing. *Marxmail* is a useful mailing list that aims to encourage discussion and debate, but the audience and level of participation there is frustratingly limited.<sup>21</sup> The *Kasama Project* is a promising website aimed at thinking through questions of “communist reconception and regroupment,” largely from a Maoist or post-Maoist perspective (though with an unrivalled culture of openness and serious debate).

I should point out that the currently existing groups themselves do produce some of the best-informed and talented socialist thinkers and activists out there. Within these organizations, there are quite useful discussions, meetings, conferences, and study groups that greatly help advance their members’ theoretical level and abilities as socialist activists (this type of education is very difficult to get outside of these groups!). Further, there are debates within socialist organizations that often help to clarify revolutionary theory, but they usually take place solely within the confines of these groups and their tiny memberships. God forbid these positions be expressed openly in publications that can be seen by all activists. Doing so would supposedly violate “democratic centralism,” which is today taken to mean that debates should remain enclosed inside tiny organizations and that only the position that wins a majority within a particular group can be expressed publicly. As Hal Draper mockingly wrote in criticizing this version of “democratic centralism”: “Let us build a ‘Bolshevik’ party by being ‘disciplined’ like good Bolsheviks. So, on the basis of a false notion of ‘Bolshevik’ discipline absorbed from the enemies of Leninism, the sect is ‘Bolshevized’ into a contracting, petrifying coterie, which replaces the bonds of a political cohesion by iron hoops such as are needed to hold together the staves of a crumbling barrel.”<sup>22</sup>

This is completely out of tune with the nature of the period we are in today. First of all, we are faced with the task of rebuilding the socialist movement. This project will

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<sup>21</sup> See <<http://www.marxmail.org/maillist.html>>.

<sup>22</sup> Draper.

require a process of collective discussion that goes far beyond the confines of existing groups today. As the organization Solidarity, which has been raising the issue of regroupment for many years, writes, “We believe that none of the existing revolutionary socialist organizations – not even all of them combined – can synthesize the experience of worker and social movement activists and provide a coherent strategy (known on the left as a ‘program’) for socialist revolution in the U.S. today. Therefore, no one can claim to be the vanguard party or its nucleus. . . . We believe that we have as much to learn as we do to teach from other socialist militants.”<sup>23</sup>

This is not to say that there are not important differences between groups, and that these should be covered up or ignored. We need a rich culture of debate in the socialist movement, not a false quest for unity at any cost. Many of the best works of Marxism have been polemics, which serve to clarify issues and advance Marxist theory. But today, most of the debates that occur remain contained within tiny groups – a parody of the type of real, broad debate that is necessary. It means that others don’t benefit from seeing this rich culture of debate, or of finding points of agreement. Proyect suggests that a healthy socialist press would “encourage debates over how to interpret [historical and international] questions . . . since they can make us even more attractive to people investigating which group to join. It is natural that you would want to join a group with a lively internal life.”<sup>24</sup> Not only that, but debates challenge activists to think through how to present issues, to clarify their ideas, and to be better prepared in explaining them to the wider world, with its diverse audiences. They are an absolutely vital means of training activists.

If you see your group as *the* vehicle for revolutionary change, the current operating model makes sense, but if you want to strike beyond this – as every group claims they do – then it really doesn’t. It means that to participate in these debates, which can be extremely enlightening, you must first join one of these sects and agree to their positions on every issue under the sun (or at least pretend to). This is an impossibly high bar to set, especially given the low level of consciousness prevailing in the U.S. today, even among those attracted to the socialist movement.

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<sup>23</sup> *Socialist Organization Today*, Solidarity pamphlet.

<sup>24</sup> Louis Proyect, “The Speech That Jack Barnes Should Have Given in 1974,” <[http://www.columbia.edu/~lnp3/mydocs/american\\_left/barnes.htm](http://www.columbia.edu/~lnp3/mydocs/american_left/barnes.htm)>.

Further, given the nature of these organizations, in place of a healthy internal debate, what is often generated is a tendency to smother any concerns. Once they begin to have doubts about the positions of the organizations they belong to, many members of socialist groups find little opportunity and see very little hope in expressing them. When their concerns become too much, they are liable to just quit the movement, often without ever even trying to express their reservations. Not only are the individuals thereby deprived of an outlet for socialist organizing, but these organizations are deprived of the internal criticism that might help, in some way, to revitalize them.

Nor is this idea of “democratic centralism” historically accurate. It mimics the form practiced by the socialist movement in the past, yet misses the content and essence. It is grossly out of tune with how consciousness actually develops, and with how a 21<sup>st</sup>-century socialist movement might be built in the U.S.

### **“Small Business Mentality”**

The model of organization today generates what Marxmail moderator Louis Proyect terms a “small business mentality.” Each group operates like a “small business that competes for market share with other small businesses, except that we are selling revolution rather than air conditioners or aluminum siding.”<sup>25</sup> This results both in an inferior product as well as a weakened marketing ability. The world might be able to live with inferior air conditioners and aluminum siding – but ending capitalism is a life-or-death question. We’re not just aiming to stay afloat and send our kids to college – we’re aiming to transform the world. The fact that most socialists understand this and yet remain committed to “small business” forms of organization is disheartening.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Louis Proyect, “What Kind of Party Do We Need?” <<http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2009/03/22/what-kind-of-party-do-we-need/>>.

<sup>26</sup> It’s interesting to see Lenin’s thoughts on the problems created by the small business mentality of his time, under conditions of severe police repression where leading activists were often rapidly arrested: “A circle that is not working yet but only looking for work would not then have to start off like an artisan in one separate small workshop who does not know anything about the development of the ‘industry’ prior to him, nor the general condition of the given production methods of this industry, but, rather, starts off as a participant in a broad enterprise that reflects the whole nation-wide revolutionary assault on the autocracy. And as the working of each cog becomes perfected, and as the number of detail workers for the common cause grows, the denser our network becomes and the less confusion in the ranks is caused by the inevitable provably [police raid].” (*What Is to Be Done?*, Lih’s translation, 827).

Within the confines of the socialist movement, you will almost never hear a competing group's activities praised – the focus must always be on how your particular group has the best analysis and methods. Often, other organizations' materials are picked over with a fine-tooth comb in a search for any flaw in their argumentation that reflects their mistaken political positions and methods. Whenever I sent out articles by other groups over my own group's internal e-mail lists, for example, I was pressured to preface them with a short critique or risk being accused of the unpardonable sin of opportunism.

One result of this pressure is that each group has to produce its own materials and duplicate many of the same tasks. They each need their own website, articles, pamphlets, and books, no matter if they're redundant with others already in existence. It's okay to use classic Marxist material from the past, but almost never literature put out by competitors.<sup>27</sup>

It's as if the currently existing groups hope that potential recruits won't notice that there are other groups out there, which would complicate recruiting them. After all, even drawing attention to any worthwhile material from other socialist organizations might lead to inconvenient questions or even worse, someone joining a rival organization. Small businesses can't afford to acknowledge, let alone advertise, their competition.

When good speakers from other socialist groups come to town, competing organizations usually refuse to publicize their events. For example, I was told I could not advertise a talk by Sherry Wolf of the ISO on "Sexuality and Socialism" – she is one of the few individuals on earth who has written at length on this topic – over the Socialist Alternative public e-mail list. The fact that I even raised the idea came as a shock to some. As if it's a bad thing if more people hear a leading socialist activist, who wrote a 400-page book on the subject, make the case for the links between sexuality and socialism. Apparently, the danger that people might be recruited to the nefarious ISO is too great. In defense of my own comrades, I doubt the ISO behaves much better. At best, most groups will allow their leading activists to go to other groups' events, in part to make sure that if any of their newer members go they don't get "confused," as well as to monitor another group's development (and potentially recruit some of their members).

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<sup>27</sup> This leads to absurd questions like, "Does our organization have anything on the Big Bang?" (Yes, in fact, we do.)

This method is like trying to build a socialist movement behind people's backs, hoping to trick activists into being satisfied with what is provided by individual tiny groups today. It can work for a time with the freshest activists, but eventually most will catch on.

As far as I can tell, Lenin, on the other hand, was willing to use whatever means necessary to popularize Marxism. In the 1890s, he and others willingly allied themselves with the bourgeois democrats who were espousing a form of bastardized Marxism (this was the period of so-called "legal Marxism"). To those who criticized this move and blamed it for the problems of economism and opportunism that began to creep into the movement in later years, he wrote, "The only ones who fear temporary alliances even with unreliable people are those with no confidence in themselves, and not a single political party could exist without such alliances." "Thanks to this alliance," he wrote, "a strikingly quick victory was achieved over populism as well as a huge dissemination of the ideas of Marxism (even though in a vulgarized form)."<sup>28</sup> This didn't mean that he abandoned the need to put forward a clear, revolutionary line. But he recognized the opportunities to broadcast it to more Russians through such methods.

In a situation where consciousness about socialism is extremely low – even among those people who are joining the movement today – as many resources as possible need to be utilized to educate people. Instead, groups today encourage activists to get their education mainly via their own meager resources. This has an impact: for example, with each group trying to organize its own speaking tours on limited resources, this leads to lower attendance, more mediocre talks (which help encourage the lower attendance and make it hard for people to take socialists seriously), and greater frustrations. While it's questionable whether more people would show up if there were fewer and better talks, I think they could encourage an upward spiral, with success breeding success, rather than the downward spiral outlined above, which is all too common today.

### **Newspapers and Publications**

A similar problem occurs with the publications of today's socialist movement. Under the current form of organization, each tiny group feels compelled to put out its own newspaper. These range in quality and usefulness, with most tending toward

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<sup>28</sup> Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, 690.

mediocrity since they are produced with scarce resources. Despite their mediocrity, they swallow a tremendous amount of the scant resources available in the U.S. socialist movement today.<sup>29</sup>

It might be argued that it makes sense for each group to publish its own paper since the papers clearly lay out their distinct positions on issues. However, while they are “line” publications put out by organizations with a specific program, it’s rare that you actually find that “line” expressed in any detail. In fact, articles and arguments are often redundant and repetitive both across papers put out by different groups as well as even within issues of an individual group’s paper. It’s sad to say, but I don’t imagine many workers or students out there anxiously await the next issue of hardly any of them.

One justification for publishing a newspaper, in addition to putting forth a group’s distinct views, is that a newspaper also acts as a “collective organizer.” As Lenin explained, “With the aid of the newspaper, and through it, a permanent organization will naturally take shape that will engage, not only in local activities, but in regular general work, and will train its members to follow political events carefully, to appraise their significance and their effect on the various strata of the population, and develop effective means for the revolutionary party to influence those events.”<sup>30</sup> However, Lenin’s vision for a newspaper was one along the lines of *Vorwarts*, the daily newspaper published by the German Social Democrats around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a paper of such prominence and quality that even people wanting to leak state secrets would contact it. Picture Wikileaks releasing its cables through a mass left wing paper and you might get a sense of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of what Lenin was aiming at.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Draper recognized this same dynamic, criticizing the publication of socialist newspapers (“mass organs”) for the way they drained resources away from producing other literature: “The publication of literature is thought of by a sect as one activity among others, and not one with a high priority. With one exception, it tends to be pushed to the bottom of the agenda. The exception is the publication of a ‘mass’ organ, which tends to take so much precedence over everything else that nothing else can be done. From our point of view, this is a grave mistake in priorities. *The creation (publication and distribution) of a basic body of literature is the accomplishment of a political center on which everything else depends.* It is the key means to the end. The first task of this basic body of literature is to make possible the formation of the cadres – to provide the political nourishment on which cadres can be raised. Without it, no healthy cadre formation is possible.”

<sup>30</sup> Lenin, “Where to Begin?”

<sup>31</sup> As Lars Lih writes, “Uncovering abuses, often with the help of sympathetic whistle-blowers who passed on incriminating documents, was a major activity of the socialist press.” Lih, 73.

Here's what Lenin had to say in *What Is to Be Done?* about the role of the type of paper he envisioned:

In order to become a Social Democrat, a worker must have a clear conception of the economic nature and the social/political profile of the landowner and the priest, the bureaucrat and the peasant, the student and the homeless tramp – know their strong sides and their weak ones, be able to analyze the catchwords and the sophisms of all possible kinds by which each class and each stratum *conceals* its selfish desires and its actual essence – a worker must be able to analyze how various institutions and laws reflect this or that interest and how they do so. And this “clear conception” cannot be taken from any book: it can be given only by living pictures and up-to-the-minute indictments of what is happening at any given time around us – the things about which everybody has something to say or at least about which people whisper among themselves. A “clear conception” comes when people realize what is expressed in such and such an event, in such and such statistics, in such and such a judicial decision, and so on and so on and so on. These all-sided political indictments are a necessary and *fundamental* condition of the education of the masses in revolutionary activities.<sup>32</sup>

A newspaper or publication of any kind can act as a collective organizer, but a miniaturized version is of an entirely different character than what Lenin was advocating in the pieces usually quoted out of context to justify today's publications.<sup>33</sup> Lenin actually insisted that local organizations cease trying to publish their own papers, because the movement did not have the resources to do so.<sup>34</sup> Today, in a painful irony, we allow

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<sup>32</sup> Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 727-8.

<sup>33</sup> As Draper writes, “There is a fundamental fallacy in the notion that the road of miniaturization (aping a mass party in miniature) is the road to a mass revolutionary party. Science proves that the scale on which a living organism exists cannot be arbitrarily changed: human beings cannot exist either on the scale of the Lilliputians or of the Brobdingagians; their life mechanisms could not function on either scale. Ants can lift 200 times their own weight, but a six foot ant could not lift 20 tons even if it could exist in some monstrous fashion. In organizational life too, this is true: If you try to miniaturize a mass party, you do not get a mass party in miniature, but only a monster.”<sup>33</sup> This is true also of all the elements of a mass party, including the newspaper.

<sup>34</sup> One reason he urged this was because of the lack of freedom of the press in tsarist Russia, meaning the publication of newspapers entailed the risk of arrest of activists. Nevertheless, he was also deeply concerned about the quality and narrow focus of these local papers. Lih, for example, summarizes one of

ourselves the luxury of printing dozens of mediocre newspapers and then quote Lenin to justify it. Then we fall back on the claim that these are just “propaganda” papers (when usually they are characterized by weak efforts at agitation – “Workers should fight back and build mass movements yadda yadda yadda”) – while quoting from Lenin’s writings on mass publications.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, Lenin envisioned a paper from which workers and activists would learn “how to live and how to die” (as one worker wrote to *Iskra*).<sup>36</sup> That was the animating force behind his efforts to develop the socialist press. According to Lih, the goals of a newspaper for Lenin were to give activist workers “the big picture and teach them to be effective political leaders. . . . Effective leader-guides ‘are cultivated exclusively by systematic, on-going assessments of all sides of our political life, of all attempts at protest and of struggle by a variety of classes and for a variety of reasons.’” In addition, he wanted to “help local activists get out of ‘the pit’ that condemns them to ignorance of what is going on in the rest of the movement: ‘The sweep of organization work would immediately become many times broader, and the success of one locality would be a constant encouragement to further perfection, to a desire to utilize the experience of a comrade at the other end of the country without having to discover it oneself.’” Finally, “working together on a common task would lead to practical coordination between different local organizations and eventually to the efficient transfer of forces, a corps of full-time roving revolutionaries by trade, and so on.”

We too need publications and media that are eagerly awaited and a must-have for activists, workers, and students today. These will reflect the resources and state of the

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his articles making this point: “Lenin states that the reader will search local Russian underground newspapers in vain for lively and interesting articles with indictments covering a wide range of abuses: diplomacy, military, church, city, financial, and so on. . . .” Thus the conclusion that one single central newspaper would be far preferable, rather than the thin gruel offered by local papers (sound familiar?).<sup>35</sup> Lenin summarized the difference between propaganda and agitation in *What Is to Be Done?*: “The propagandist, dealing with, say, the question of unemployment, must explain the capitalistic nature of crises, the cause of their inevitability in modern society, the necessity for the transformation of this society into a socialist society, etc. In a word, he must present “many ideas,” so many, indeed, that they will be understood as an integral whole only by a (comparatively) few persons. The agitator, however, speaking on the same subject, will take as an illustration a fact that is most glaring and most widely known to his audience, say, the death of an unemployed worker’s family from starvation, the growing impoverishment, etc., and, utilising this fact, known to all, will direct his efforts to presenting a *single idea* to the “masses,” e.g., the senselessness of the contradiction between the increase of wealth and the increase of poverty; he will strive *to rouse* discontent and indignation among the masses against this crying injustice, leaving a more complete explanation of this contradiction to the propagandist.”

<sup>36</sup> Lih.

socialist movement today – but I think they should be animated by the same force that drove Lenin. In my opinion, this cannot be accomplished without a serious rethinking of the impact of sectarian forms of organization.

Most promisingly, we should imagine ways to harness the potential of the Internet to develop new socialist publications. One idea would be to develop a website compiling the best articles and analysis from a socialist perspective, as well as links to key articles from all types of sources. It could also be a place for debate, allowing a free exchange of ideas between activists across the country and the world. It could solicit reports from workers and youth on situations in their workplaces, schools, and communities, encouraging them to develop a voice, as well as providing examples of successful organizing to others. Radical writers' groups or tendencies could focus more on developing original and insightful bodies of literature and on popularizing them, rather than devoting themselves to trying to produce a redundant "literature" literature that deep down reflects some sort of conception that their own specific newspaper or website is or could be a "mass organ."

Unfortunately, much of the socialist movement seems to be stuck in a time warp. It's striking that, to my knowledge, the Internet has not produced much creative rethinking by socialists on organization or publications. There has been a proliferation of left-liberal websites like Truthout, Alternet, DailyKos, Huffington Post, and others, which group a wide variety of voices together and reach many millions of readers each month. Yet despite the immense focus of the socialist movement on the importance of publications and literature, no comparable website with a distinctly socialist voice has emerged. Some claim that the "space" for such a site doesn't exist. Of course, the same people who make this argument never question whether the "space" exists to justify dozens of socialist groups devoting so much of their resources to publishing their own newspapers and website. The success of sites like Counterpunch and ZNet, which are farther to the left of those listed above, ought to give us encouragement. A lot of things would be possible if more resources and creative thinking were devoted to brainstorming broader, more creative, and higher quality projects, rather than focused on the inner lives of the currently existing groups. Unfortunately, it's not even clear whether the idea of a broader socialist website – or even e-mail list – has been seriously considered. If there are

people who think this way inside of existing socialist groups, one would never know it, since debates usually are confined within their own membership. But it doesn't even seem like many socialists have made much of an attempt to get published on the sites mentioned above. Instead, the tendency is to plow all your resources into developing your own group's site, which just reproduces most of the problems associated with producing your own newspaper.

Finally, I should note that there are many positive sides to all the current socialist newspapers. First and foremost, they give new activists experience in writing and editing articles. I can say that I have benefited personally from these opportunities, though there is no reason they couldn't be improved. Second, while many people see the main problem with "sects" in the fact that they are "annoying" because they try to sell their newspapers on demonstrations, this too has its positives, as these groups actually promote socialist ideas among workers and activists, even if the sheer number is an irritant. This is not something that should be given up, but rather improved, with an effort to rethink and devise more creative ways to get our ideas across. Also, for all their limitations, these newspapers can also be a decent basic introduction to a socialist analysis of current events. The problem is that so much more is not only necessary, but actually possible if we put our heads on straight.

### **Current Divisive Forms of Organization Weakens All Campaigns**

*"Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs"* – Karl Marx<sup>37</sup>

All of the above is focused on writing, reading, and thinking – what about actually campaigning, the heart and soul of the movement and the key to building a real left in this country? There's already too much talking in the socialist movement that is not in any clear way linked to practice. Right now, to me, the top task is to build campaigns that can fight against budget cuts, wars, poverty, sexism, racism, environmental catastrophe, etc. Unfortunately, we have not seen major movements of this type develop despite the

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<sup>37</sup> "Letter to Bracke," <[http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/letters/75\\_05\\_05.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/letters/75_05_05.htm)>.

economic crisis and the growing disillusionment with the Obama administration. Some on the socialist left seem to take solace in the fact that major mass movements during the Great Depression did not develop until several years after it hit, particularly around 1934.

Yet I can't help but think that the current form of organization on the left is playing a role in holding things back (and will in the future), despite the well-meaning efforts of activists. It's fairly simple to politically recognize and argue that movements "from below" are the key to change society, but it requires much more sophisticated thinking to actually put these ideas into practice. Organizing a successful campaign on any issue usually means establishing roots in a particular community or group of communities, as well as relying on leadership by a core of dedicated and experienced activists who can bring their collective knowledge and skills to bear in a united struggle, in alliance with broadening sectors of workers, youth, and community members. Currently, each little group's effort to recruit to its own banner too often leaves different organizations attempting to stake out their own territory by launching campaigns on different issues at the same time. This isn't to say that there aren't dozens of issues that need campaigning around, but the result is that good activists are routinely isolated from each other and working at cross purposes, weakening *all* of our campaigns. This means that all meetings and demonstrations have lower turnout, our leaflets and websites are worse, we are less able to break into the mainstream press, less able to attract new activists, and on and on.

This is not just an issue of "socialists are more interested in selling their paper than building campaigns," a common and largely false charge (except for the truly sectarian groups). We all want to build winning campaigns, both to improve working people's lives and to develop the capacity to struggle and show that it is possible to change society. Socialists are quite often the most energetic and self-sacrificing activists around. But that is also why our (often unintentional) sectarianism is a severe limitation, because we really do have a crucial role to play.

This is of vital importance right now because the left is at a stage where it desperately needs some wins. Victories in united campaigns can help raise the confidence of broader sections of youth and workers, inspiring them to become activists themselves. Through this activism they might even be inspired and convinced to become socialists.

Additionally, by bringing more talented activists together, there could be better training of newer activists, a critical task (and a difficult one, given the paucity of experienced activists able to provide mentorship and training). Instead, the ongoing ineffectiveness of our campaigns reinforces the isolation and despair that many people with progressive ideas feel in this country. Our protests are reduced to expressions of moral outrage which, while important in their own right, are far from a strategy for changing the world. Contrast them to – just to give one example – the actions that helped detonate the civil rights movement such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the first of the student sit-ins at restaurants, which were often meticulously planned.

Within each group, there are discussions about where best to focus resources and what campaigns or projects to take up (that is, when groups feel they have enough resources to move beyond pure “propaganda”). Should we focus on fighting cuts to education, or rebuilding the anti-war movement, or organizing to stop foreclosures? Should we organize conferences or study groups to promote socialist ideas? Each group recognizes that its resources are limited and it’s only realistic to campaign on a few issues, at most.

But imagine if we could have these discussions together, in a broader forum, and then orient the resources of more of the socialist movement and more of the left to a few strategic, united projects? These discussions could happen at conferences, strategy sessions, retreats, or other venues. They would not have to be limited to members of current socialist groups, but could seek to bring together all the best activists on the radical left in different areas. The fact that I can confidently assert that these types of discussions are not happening is a testament to just how sectarian and lacking in common sense the left is today. If socialists play an important role in these struggles, it will help overcome the stereotype that we are just a bunch of insular talkers, and show that we are capable of participating in and leading broad-based victorious campaigns.

One might ask who will decide which issues are important? What method of selection should be employed? What about all the issues that get left out? These will be important questions to resolve, but I think we should acknowledge that, regardless, there are better opportunities for addressing them in the type of venue I am proposing above. Also, there is no shortage of issues to take up. Indeed, as socialists, opposed to all forms

of oppression and exploitation, we often feel an obligation to campaign on every one of them at once. But if we can strategically decide where to orient more of our limited resources, and this leads to effective campaigns, this will raise the confidence of people to struggle around many different issues. Just think about how the inspiring victories of the civil rights movement spurred on the women's movement, LGBT movement, Chicano movement, anti-war movement, and labor movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

None of this is to deny the enormous obstacles that exist today, one of which is the willingness to struggle among the American people. But the situation appears to be changing, with growing frustration at the lack of change under the Obama administration providing an opening for organizing struggles from below. And the impact of the events of the "Arab Spring" on the consciousness of Americans should not be underestimated, as we have already seen to some degree in Madison, Wisconsin. It's quite possible that successful campaigns could have a wide impact and show people that there is an alternative to griping and despair – that it actually is possible to struggle and win.

### **No Division of Labor**

A similar logic can be applied to the socialist movement as a whole. The isolation of activists with often quite similar views results in a misuse of resources and a replication of labor, which impoverishes the movement as a whole. Instead of having a real division of labor, we have people in different groups doing the same exact things, from trying to gather reading lists to writing and editing similar newspapers to organizing speaking tours and more. Given the very small number of socialists around today, this means that our precious, scarce resources are being misused when it comes to the crucial task of popularizing socialist ideas.<sup>38</sup>

This isn't to say that every group has enough areas of agreement to work together. But couldn't those of us who do – those of us who are interested in building a broader socialist movement – agree to pool our resources? Couldn't we find enough areas of

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<sup>38</sup> A fascinating point by Lenin in *What is to be Done?*: "In the mass of cases, these forces are now bled white by narrow local work, whereas then it would be possible to transfer an agitator or organizer with any sort of talent from one end of the country to another and there would be constant occasions for doing so. Beginning with a small journey on party business at the expense of the Party, people would get used to being fully supported by the Party, would become revolutionaries by trade, would make of themselves genuine political leaders."

agreement to pool our resources to develop good material for study groups, to develop reading lists, to train excellent speakers and organize speaking tours, and to put out high-quality leaflets, newspapers and magazines? Couldn't we devote some people to focus on developing a strategy of breaking into the mass media? Yet with so many of the existing socialist activists caught up in the day-to-day tasks, this means there is very little opportunity for a division of labor.

Instead, socialist activists are constantly teetering near the edge of burnout, because they are burdened with doing nearly every task under the sun. In the absence of any ability to have a strategic discussion about where to orient resources, the only solution seems to be for them to work harder and do more. Strategic thinking is replaced by constant appeals for “Audacity, audacity, audacity!” Burnout is always going to be a danger – but it is heightened when activists feel ineffective and isolated, especially if this persists over periods of years. If you are left to feel as if the fate of the world depends on the success of your group of 150 or so largely inexperienced activists, and that it's on your shoulders to train new activists, to educate people, to write – the pressure can be overwhelming.

This also leads to a disproportionate focus on the internal workings of your tiny organization – because, if its ideas are the key vehicle to transform the world, then it must be built up as much as possible. Hal Draper noted this tendency, writing, “The internal life of the sect becomes not a necessary evil keyed to its outside activities, but rather a substitute gratification.”<sup>39</sup> “Gratification” might be the wrong word – as this internal life is often a painful routine of endless meetings, phone conferences, national conferences, meetings to plan meetings, and my personal favorite, meetings to plan meetings to plan meetings. In part, this is a necessary feature of activist life in general, but it is taken to absurd extremes within many existing socialist groups today, swallowing up valuable resources and often becoming a substitute for mass work (or reading or writing or thinking). It means you have to spend tremendous amounts of time on internal debates, dues collection (both to finance your activities and as a measure of your members' commitment), micro-managing political education, and more. All of these activities have

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<sup>39</sup> Draper.

an important place in any socialist movement, but I question the amount of time spent on them today.

### **Narrowing of Vision**

The form of organization dominant on the socialist left also lends itself to a narrowing of vision. In place of a movement attempting to draw together the various movements around the world and draw lessons from them, there is a tendency to define the boundaries of the socialist movement as beginning and ending with your own group. Almost every socialist group will issue the caveat that they don't consider themselves to be *the* vanguard party, or *the* mass party, that they recognize their forces are modest and the creation of such a party is going to require broader forces and struggles. But this type of talk is cheap, and far outweighed by the actual mentality within the movement.

I have seen this mentality at work when, in response to big events, I have heard members of my own group immediately respond, "Do we have a group there?" I've heard this so often that it feels like no matter the issue, from an earthquake in Haiti to a hurricane in New Orleans – all at times elicit a similar response: "Do we have a group there?" It's as if without that, things are doomed from the start. My only conclusion, based on how universal this response is (and how long it remained in my own mind) is that this thinking is engendered by the narrow forms of organization in the movement – and yet more evidence of the way our thinking is impoverished by this form of organization. The assumption created by our current form of organization lends itself to the unfortunate idea that all knowledge must be concentrated in our ranks.

If we do not have a group there, that will not prevent us from issuing some sort of proclamation about what is to be done. There is nothing wrong with this in theory – the movement can benefit from informed debate about tactics and the sharing of experiences across borders. But in practice, these types of proclamations are often embarrassingly shallow analyses, reflecting the low theoretical level characteristic of many groups and the misunderstanding that Marxism is some sort of formula to be applied in every situation rather than a method of analysis requiring first and foremost a thorough understanding of your subject matter. This type of thinking makes it seem as if the question of revolution is an easy one, which will in the end redound to the detriment of

building a socialist movement in the U.S., able to tackle all the complex issues we will face.

To understand just how far from Marxism these types of shallow proclamations are, just look at all the time Marx and Engels spent in libraries engaged in serious study on a multitude of topics. They did this not because of some quaint academic curiosity, but because their historical materialist analysis meant delving deep into their subject matter.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately this same devotion to serious study is not shared by many of us who claim to be following in Marx's tradition today.

I was struck by a thought while watching the World Cup with some of my comrades. After a few beers increased their already higher-than-normal confidence to comment on seemingly every topic under the sun, several of them screamed repeatedly at the TV, "Why are they passing the ball backwards??? What a bunch of fools!!!" Of course, in soccer, passing the ball backwards is often critical for opening up space, gaining time, surveying openings on the field, and maintaining possession, all important parts of the game, but which can't be understood without a thorough understanding of the sport. To be fair, anyone unfamiliar with soccer and under the influence of alcohol can easily make the same mistake – but it struck me as a frightening metaphor for a method of thinking all too common among socialists.

One might excuse this type of thinking as more characteristic of people newer to the socialist movement. Perhaps it's just the schematic thought that is a symptom of the

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<sup>40</sup> August Nimtz, *Marx and Engels and the Democratic Breakthrough*, 154-5. "What clearly distinguished the Marx party from any other revolutionary current of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was exactly the importance it attached to 'swotting' – research and study based on what Engels termed at this stage, 'the materialist conception.' . . . This included distillation of the lessons of the previous revolutionary wave, its causes, course, and outcome." Nimtz also quotes Liebknecht: "Wilhelm Liebknecht, recruit to the Marx party in early 1850s, spent much time with the Marx household: 'Marx went to the British Museum daily and urged us to go too. Study! Study! That was the categoric injunction that we heard often enough from him and that he gave us by his example and the continual work of his mighty brain. While the other emigrants were daily planning a world revolution and day after day, night after night intoxicating themselves with the opium-like motto: 'Tomorrow it will begin!,' we the 'brimstone band,' the 'bandits,' the 'dregs of mankind,' [some of the epithets hurled at the Marx party by opponents] spent our time in the British Museum and tried to educate ourselves and prepare arms and ammunition for the future fight. . . . Marx was a stern teacher: he not only urged us to study, he made sure that we did so" (Nimtz, 153). Nevertheless, "An essential trait of Marx's modus operandi was to combine daily organizational activism in the most detailed way – what today would be called 'licking the stamps' or doing the 's—t work' – with theoretical leadership. The effectiveness of the latter, in fact, was enhanced by that of the former; it made Marx a more credible leader. Marx epitomized the middle-class thinker who subordinated his life to the revolutionary cause of the proletariat. Being a doer as well as a thinker had the added advantage of rendering class baiting ineffective" (Nimtz, 194).

“infantile disorder” of left-wing communism diagnosed by Lenin.<sup>41</sup> The question is how this form of thinking can be overcome. There is a real pressure to be able to issue these types of shallow proclamations on every issue (including the World Cup), because, it often seems, if you can’t provide your own independent answer to every question under the sun then your group’s need to exist independently of everyone else might be suspect. Once you join one of the existing socialist groups, you feel immense pressure to defend your group’s position on all sorts of questions that you most likely have not studied thoroughly, from Cuba to Israel/Palestine to the permanent revolution and beyond. But we need to realize there is nothing wrong with saying, “I don’t know enough about that” when questioned about a topic you have not studied in depth.

Marx was not afraid to do this. When young Russian activists continually asked for his views about the role of the Russian peasant commune in the revolutionary struggle he told them that he was not sure.<sup>42</sup> Instead of just issuing an off-the-cuff proclamation, as so many of us youthful socialists are prone to do, Marx spent *years* at the end of his life learning Russian and immersing himself in studies of Russian society and the commune. What humility! Yet for those supposedly following in his tradition today, it’s often enough to just scan the news, do a quick Google search, and then apply a formula. This isn’t Marxism, and the sooner we learn that, the better.

To be fair, these problems aren’t because of a lack of trying on the part of socialists today, who spend an immense amount of time reading and trying to understand revolutionary theory. I do not mean to imply any bad faith – I am merely trying to explain the mindset that seems to be produced by current forms of organization.

I also don’t intend to suggest that we should take an agnostic position on issues, nor do I want to reinforce the liberal idea that people in each particular area should just work out their own forms of resistance, and we have no right to comment on them or debate with them. But I do mean to suggest that we should all be more humble, cautious, and meticulous in our studies, not just out of a sense of respect for those fighting for social justice in other countries, but also because by really understanding the problems facing activists elsewhere we can learn a lot about how to change our own societies. And

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<sup>41</sup> See Lenin, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. See especially his chapter “No Compromises?” for a parallel with my point about soccer.

<sup>42</sup> See Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the ‘Peripheries of Capitalism’*. 1984.

we should be dissatisfied with half-answers or anything that relies too heavily upon a certain formula.

The point is how to get people to think, and how to most effectively create the independent thinkers who will be crucial to the development of the socialist movement. As German socialist Wilhelm Liebknecht, one of Marx's closest contemporaries, explained, "Marx went to the British Museum daily and urged us to go too. Study! Study! That was the categorical injunction that we heard often enough from him and that he gave us by his example and the continual work of his mighty brain. . . . We spent our time in the British Museum and tried to educate ourselves and prepare arms and ammunition for the future fight."<sup>43</sup> The currently existing socialist groups undoubtedly play a role in this – don't get me wrong. But there is a certain smug satisfaction created by today's organizational forms, at the expense of the desire to independently – and deeply – study phenomena. That has to change, because Marxism offers the most advanced and sophisticated (and correct) way of analyzing the world (and changing it).

### **Tunnel Vision**

Another unfortunate product of the sect form is that it leads to an overemphasis on the history of your own group, diverting attention from the rich history of the socialist movement. It's bad enough when socialists commit the sin of "Russian Revolutionism," the tendency to use the Bolshevik Revolution as a frame of reference in nearly every discussion even though it is an unfamiliar topic for most young activists.<sup>44</sup> This trend gets taken to even worse extremes within the tiny groups that exist today.

For example, if you have run across Socialist Alternative, you have probably been told that our British organization played a key role in the struggle against the poll tax in Britain which brought down Margaret Thatcher. Never mind whether anyone in the U.S. knows about this struggle – it's essential in explaining and justifying our existence. Or, else you'll hear from other groups about how their analysis of the character of the Soviet Union or other similar regimes distinguishes them – in the ISO's case, it has traditionally

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Nimtz, 153.

<sup>44</sup> Or as the band The Minutemen put it in their song "Paranoid Chant": "I keep thinking of Russia, of Russia!" Please forgive me if I've committed this same sin throughout this essay by constantly quoting Lenin.

been their understanding that these countries were “state capitalist,” while in the case of other groups it’s their understanding that they were “deformed workers’ states” that gives them an edge in their analysis of the world. There are important lessons to learn from the poll tax movement, and even better ones to learn from the Russian Revolution, one of the greatest events in world history (and even important methodological ones involved in understanding the character of the Soviet Union), but the tendency to discuss these issues regardless of your audience reinforces the sense that too many socialists are out of touch with current reality. A lot of this has to do with bumps along the road in learning the art of explaining your ideas, but it also is related to deeper issues.

This is the logic that Marx and Engels criticized so thoroughly – that sectarianism leads to a focus on the issues that are central in the life and dogma of the sect, rather than those that come from existing reality and the struggles to change it.<sup>45</sup> To be fair, we study and make reference to these struggles because we think they help us understand the dynamic of movements and revolutions and tactics and strategies for changing the world. In this sense, we are acting in the tradition of Marx and Engels, who studied the French Revolution (and routinely employed metaphors and lessons drawn from it), as well as Lenin and others who drew upon the Paris Commune of 1871. I would never, ever, ever advocate that people stop studying or discussing the Russian Revolution.

But the necessity of constantly focusing on the history of our group, or your historical differences with other groups, is too often a diversion from focusing on the big questions of our time. In addition, as Proyect writes, “To my knowledge, Lenin never asked people to become Bolsheviks on the basis of how they understood the Jacobins.”<sup>46</sup> The entire point of studying the past, for Marxists, is to help us understand how to answer the big questions of our time, which involves relating to consciousness today.

It might be fair to ask whether blaming the sect form for diverting attention from the big questions is correct. After all, it could have more to do with the youthfulness of the movement and certain difficulties inherent in educating people. For example, Lenin’s

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<sup>45</sup> Marx’s spirit is perhaps best captured in this quote from a letter he wrote to Arnold Ruge early in his career, “As Marx wrote to Ruge, “We do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle.” <[http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43\\_09.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm)>.

<sup>46</sup> Proyect, “Why Are There So Many Socialist Groups?”

wife Krupskaya wrote about how in the early days of Russian socialist activity, it was more common for intellectuals to lecture at the workers on issues that were not at the forefront of their minds. Often, for example, they would read them Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (curiously enough, still being overused today), a work she implies they had trouble relating to. Meanwhile, she describes Lenin's method: "Vladimir Ilyich was interested in every little detail that could help him to piece together a picture of the life and conditions of the workers, to find some sort of avenue of approach to them in the matter of revolutionary propaganda. . . . Vladimir Ilyich read Marx's *Capital* to the workers and explained it to them. He devoted the second half of the lesson to questioning the workers about their work and conditions of labor, showing them the bearing which their life had on the whole structure of society, and telling them in what way the existing order could be changed. This linking of theory with practice was a feature of Vladimir Ilyich's work in the study-circles. Gradually other members of our circle adopted the same method."<sup>47</sup> This method, of asking questions and listening to the experiences of workers and communities in order to be able to "patiently explain" the ideas of socialism (and, crucially, to understand the concrete conditions and consciousness of the American working class today), is vital to cultivate in the socialist movement today.

But the problem is this: How are we supposed to focus on these questions when we have to focus attention on making sure whether workers and activists agree with us on our position on Cuba or that the Soviet Union was a deformed workers' state? Or, if not on those issues, than on any of a number of others "crucial" to distinguishing one socialist group from another? Focusing so much mental energy on relatively minor historical questions obscures the big picture, and hampers the movement's organic growth.

In his recent posthumously published memoir *North Star*, Peter Camejo outlined how, in his view, these issues were rooted in the organizational methods of Trotskyism, "This concept of the 'program' was a defining aspect of Trotskyism. Born as a faction opposing the Stalinist degradation of socialism, the Trotskyist movement defended the founders of the socialist movement while at the same time rejecting the cult-like

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<sup>47</sup> Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*.

deification of Marx and Lenin. Thus the Trotskyists became caught in a framework that focused not only on the correct interpretation of Marx and Lenin but also on the correct interpretation of events within Russia. This led to the rapid development of rigidity in how they viewed and approached the world around them. Groups of Trotskyists across the globe focused on the internal debate over the degeneration of the Soviet Communist Party and its worldwide influence, rather than on the expressions of the living struggles of their own country. As an instrument to revive the mass world movement for social justice, I think that Trotskyism had historical, internal, sectarian limitations that blocked it from being able to become a critical force for social change.”<sup>48</sup>

What is necessary, in my opinion, is something that encourages thinking along the lines of what Burt Cochran said was achieved by the Detroit Labor Forum in the 1950s: “Because it is genuinely non-partisan, attempts to address itself to the independent radical, and seeks solutions to the great problems of our times rather than devoting itself to the intra-mural bickerings of small sects, it has won a position and attracts larger audiences than Detroit has seen in the past decade.”<sup>49</sup> Whatever the fate of these Labor Forums and other similar projects, that remains precisely what we need today – a socialist movement that can be an attractive force, one where radicals and developing activists will feel at home. One that, instead of narrowing its vision and focusing on questions that arise from a “small business” mentality, is devoted to truly addressing “the great problems of our times,” stemming from “the expressions of the living struggles.” This will be crucially informed by a critical study of the movement’s past, but not swallowed up by that same history.

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Camejo, *North Star*. I can anticipate the objection to these points: “Camejo left Trotskyism and lost his way,” going to work as a high-paid money manager and later “opportunistically” joining the Green Party, for the most part jettisoning his socialist program (in reality he seems to have been trying to figure out how to present it in fresh ways). And besides, the argument will go, he had a bad experience in the Socialist Workers’ Party during its period of degeneration – if only he had been in a healthier Trotskyist organization, he would not have reached these conclusions. In my opinion these are fairly shallow criticisms that avoid engaging with the substance of Camejo’s criticisms. For more of Camejo’s thinking (not to say I necessarily agree with all of it), see his “Return to Materialism,” <<http://members.optushome.com.au/spainter/Materialism.html>>.

<sup>49</sup> <[http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/amersocialist/amersoc\\_5705.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/amersocialist/amersoc_5705.htm)>.

## Why the Sect Form Persists

*“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” – Karl Marx, 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire*

Given all the issues raised above, why does the current narrow form of organization persist? Most importantly, why does there seem to be no real organized expression of the ideas I’m raising, since I’m sure there are plenty of people out there who feel similarly?

My guess is that it has a lot to do with the often-underestimated force of inertia. Despite all the frustrations, it’s still easier to work inside one of the existing socialist organizations than outside of one. Any of the socialist organizations today provides activists with a structure, a group of co-thinkers, and an already existing organization with a momentum and mission of its own. Being a member of one of these groups gives you an innumerable number of tasks to do, tasks that could keep many people busy for a lifetime. You have to produce a newspaper, write for and publish a website, organize regular meetings, discuss your ideas with new members, design leaflets, hold paper sales, organize campaigns on as many issues as possible, design t-shirts and buttons, hold fundraising parties, prepare reports, and on and on and on, ad infinitum. This leaves very little time to think about bigger picture questions, such as whether your group should even exist. Like Albert Camus’ existentialist Sisyphus, we just keep rolling the rock up the hill, taking comfort in the knowledge that we are at least doing something, even if it might turn out to be a relatively futile gesture. (Never mind that Camus was extremely hostile to Marxism and ruled out the possibility of revolutionary change.)

In essence, despite all the claims to the contrary, building your own tiny group becomes an end in itself. This is true even though every group sees its role as helping to build a mass movement of workers in this country and around the world. While there is no doubt that socialist groups today play and will continue to play an important role in

this process, ultimately, the sect form becomes a hindrance. Instead of helping develop and expand relations with activists throughout the left, it has a tendency to cut you off from real, deep connections with people outside of your own group, and not just other socialists, either. This might seem contradictory, since many socialist groups do maintain and develop broader relations with others on the left. But ultimately, they spend much less time cultivating these relationships than they do on internal political issues. Others on the left have to always be considered from the standpoint of potential recruits to your tiny organization.

The force of inertia is compounded by the fact that many of the most experienced socialist activists are to be found in the various sects in existence. For anyone new to the movement, their knowledge can be quite impressive – and intimidating. There is a natural tendency to defer to those who seem to have more experience. Newer activists might not even know what are the right questions to ask, and might be prone to just accept the wisdom of those who brought them into the movement. When they start having questions about the organizational model, these are more likely to manifest themselves as feelings of self-doubt or a lack of self-confidence.

Whenever people start to question the logic of building a sect, where can they turn? What organized force is out there for socialists not interested in joining one of the many existing groups? The landscape is all but barren. The most common experience, therefore, seems to be for people to drop out of the organized socialist movement altogether, leaving those of us with doubts inside the movement even more isolated – and more likely to just give up on the whole project, or to continue to begrudgingly build our tiny groups. There are also severe limitations to raising these types of issues within the existing groups. Despite the democratic formalities that exist within organizations today, they are actually severely limited. As Proyect explains, “The real threat to party democracy in [existing “Leninist” formations today] is not ham-fisted bureaucratic interventions. It is instead self-censorship by the rank-and-file all the way up to key leaders who are very wary of challenging adopted party positions out of fear of being tarnished as ‘petty bourgeois,’ not ‘understanding Marxism,’” or of “becoming

ostracized.”<sup>50</sup> And an even bigger obstacle is the fact that the space to raise big questions is extremely limited within these types of organizations, since they are predicated on such a high level of agreement on very specific questions.

Those of us who express skepticism about the usefulness of building these tiny groups are often accused of a “loss of confidence in the revolutionary capacity of the U.S. working class,” or something to that effect. We are charged with “looking for shortcuts,” as if we are just not tough enough to face the long, hard slog required by any struggle for serious transformation. My impression is that these types of accusations have been leveled repeatedly over time at anyone look for a way out of the sectarian wilderness. For example, those who left the SWP to found of the American Socialist Union in the 1950s were said to have “become bought off by post-WWII prosperity and lost their militancy.”<sup>51</sup> It all seems so simple when you can just confidently build your tiny group – just toughen up!

I strongly disagree with this accusation. Still, it seems to have a certain validity when those who give up on the sect form offer no alternative model and too often seem to give in to demoralization.<sup>52</sup> There are plenty of reasons why this happens, foremost among them the difficulties of starting a new organization. They also might legitimately be burnt out, leading to feelings of inadequacy, and even fear of disrupting the organizing being done by people who are their close friends. Instead of healthily raising legitimate concerns, it’s more common to suppress them and feel shame, guilt, anger, or other similar emotions. On top of this, there are of course also the pressures of reality, of needing to earn a living in this society, to support yourself and your family. If socialist activists become demoralized or burnt out, and see neither an alternative model, nor a means to transform their own organizations, they can be lost to graduate school, to jobs in the union bureaucracy, to non-profit organization, or other accommodations to the system.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Louis Proyect, “John Molyneux on Party Democracy,” <<http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2009/10/27/john-molyneux-on-party-democracy/>>.

<sup>51</sup> <<http://www.swans.com/library/art16/lproy62.html>>.

<sup>52</sup> The American Socialist Union, for example, closed up shop in 1959, and other projects have also not succeeded in creating anything long-lasting.

<sup>53</sup> To be clear: I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with working for a union or non-profit or going to grad school – but in the absence of revolutionary organization, it can be hard to resist the powerful reformist pressures they can exert.

But this demoralization is the product not just of doubts about the prospects for socialism or social change in the U.S., but also doubts about an organizational model that seems destined to fail. There is too often a shallow understanding of human psychology operative in our groups, one that implies that it's solely political pessimism that drives people out of the movement. But it's not just political pessimism; it can also be a sense that the road you are going on is a dead-end. When you're driving down a dead end, you don't just keep going, hoping that eventually it will lead you in the right direction. Instead, you usually turn around and look at the map, or ask for directions at the nearest gas station, or any number of other means. If the driver refuses to turn around and insists on keeping going, it's understandable if some people might jump out of the car.

It doesn't have to be this way. I would argue that it is up to those of us who see the sect road as a dead-end to fight to develop an alternative, whatever that may look like. This is of crucial importance because often the best people attracted to the socialist movement are first and foremost activists. They want to transform the world, and they want practical answers on how to effectively do it. In my view, those of us with experience inside existing socialist groups – both those who still belong and those who have been burnt out by them – have an important role to play in this process.

### **Building an Alternative**

*“It is a serious matter to destroy a man's faith without replacing it.” – Victor Serge, *Birth of Our Power*<sup>54</sup>*

As a friend recently told me, “I'm prepared to dedicate my life to this movement – I'd just like it to have some chance of succeeding.”

We absolutely do have a chance of succeeding. I am fully convinced of the revolutionary potential in this country and around the world. I am convinced there are thousands of people out there who right now want to join a socialist movement of some kind, but whose resources and talents are being wasted, because they aren't organized, or they don't see existing organizational forms as having a “chance of succeeding.” I'm

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<sup>54</sup> Serge, *Birth of Our Power*, 135.

convinced there are many others who are not yet socialists but want to build a powerful, progressive left. As the crisis of capitalism worsens the living conditions for many, further polarizing the gap between the rich few and the poorer majority, these camps of prospective progressives, radicals, and socialists are likely to grow.

The challenge facing socialists today is to build a credible movement that can productively utilize the resources of all those who want to fight for revolutionary change. A major issue right now is that though there are no doubt millions of people in this country who have come to the conclusion capitalism is unjust, or that it just doesn't work, many seem to feel that the effort to fight for a systemic alternative is hopeless; therefore they either work hard within the system to patch it up, or else fall into cynicism and passivity. There's only so long that you can futilely hurl yourself against it (though there's a lot to be said for the nobility of those who do this). And considering how tough it is to just survive under this system, why should working people and others devote energies to hurling themselves against an enemy that they don't believe we can actually overpower?

I'm convinced this potential will only be harnessed – and this widespread cynicism overcome – if we ask the big questions. I am also absolutely convinced that continued existence of many tiny competing organizations is a bad idea, one that needs to be challenged and broken up, or somehow transcended. I'm convinced that, no matter how ideologically committed they are, most people are not going to give themselves to a movement that doesn't seem to stand a chance of winning, or that routinely wastes the precious resources of its members.

Those of us in the socialist movement right now, or on its periphery, have a crucial role to play. While most of the best forces for socialism in this country will come from new, freshly radicalizing layers, a socialist movement is not going to just drop from the sky. Therefore, what those of us in the movement do right now matters a great deal. Typically we take that to mean that we have to work harder to build our existing groups. But if we are building on a foundation of sand, all of our increased efforts will lead to very little. There is a lot to be said for Joe Ramsey's words in the introduction to this issue of *Cultural Logic*: "Perhaps the most important thing that we can be doing now is surveying the terrain upon which we stand, discerning what is soil and what sand,

marking off what we know are the dead ends, in an attempt to find new and fresh paths to open and more fertile ground.”

Sometimes the criticisms directed at the socialist movement make it seem as if it would be best if the existing groups just fell apart and disappeared, in part because they are seen as an obstacle to such a process of rethinking. This is not my attitude. Despite all of what I’ve written above, I have much more respect for those members of (many of) today’s “micro-sects” who are actually trying to go out and argue for socialist ideas than for the armchair critics who always seem to know better. For all their weaknesses, the existing socialist groups give new activists experience and training – in writing articles and leaflets, postering, petitioning, organizing – as well as a basic socialist education. You can’t get these things from a blog or a website or almost anywhere else. Even selling mediocre newspapers has its positive side: it’s good that at rallies somebody promotes socialist ideas and tries to organize the attendees and get them involved in long-term activism. As one friend, a serious activist who is considering joining the socialist movement, recently told me, “I would rather be building a micro-sect than nothing.” And he has a point.<sup>55</sup> The problem is that so much of building a micro-sect involves differentiating yourself from other groups and justifying the existence of your own particular organization that the horizon of possibilities is much reduced.

In place of a dismissive approach that just writes off members of existing “micro-sects,” we need a critical engagement with (and among!) them. This doesn’t mean that I believe the key question is “regroupment” by uniting the currently existing socialist left into one common organization. Anyone who looks around at the existing left with a sober eye will reasonably ask: “You mean you think bringing *these* people together is the key?” I don’t. Many current socialist activists are stuck in their ways, too invested in their own groups, and unable to creatively think through the complex problems we face. Many others are sectarians by acquired nature and appear incapable of interacting with real-life human beings. I agree with Mike Ely of the Kasama Project, who writes, “I’m sure there are pockets of creativity within the organized left. But I also believe that much of the organized left is, in how it imagines and defines itself, both exhausted and relatively

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<sup>55</sup> Even Hal Draper conceded this point: “Unquestionably, sometimes a sect may be better than nothing, but that piece of wisdom does not point to a line.” He added, “It does not follow, even from Marx’s all-out abhorrence of the sect-form, that all sects are always equally harmful.”

clueless. Most left projects are running on routine, self-delusion and sheer vapor. And I don't think that the new revolutionary movement will mainly emerge out of those current organized left silos."<sup>56</sup> Instead, the key forces are going to come primarily from people who are outside the movement today, particularly from among younger generations, who lack the baggage of the existing groups and are instilled with the energy, optimism, and creativity necessary to take on the arduous task of building a viable socialist movement.

These younger forces, however, will not just automatically find their way to Marxism or socialism – they have to be introduced to it somehow. We are working with finite human material, and those currently active in the various tiny groups have important accumulated experience and knowledge. That is why I think it is absolutely essential to try to start a process of discussion among members of existing organizations, in the hopes of building something that can actually be an attractive force that reaches younger activists and potential activists. If enough of those people could be won over and convinced to spend as much time thinking through how to build a broader socialist movement as they currently spend trying to expand their own tiny organizations, that would be a significant step forward. Perhaps I'm being naive, but the fact that the socialist movement is now made up of largely younger generations for whom a lot of the questions dividing groups are mainly of historical interest means there may be more opportunities for this to happen.

Some might argue that “micro-sects” are all that can be produced under the current conditions of overall weakness on the left, minimal levels of mass struggle, and low consciousness. As Marx wrote in 1871, “So long as the sects are (historically) justified, the working class is not yet ripe for an independent historic movement”; the converse is also true.<sup>57</sup> According to this argument, attempting to force the issue and form broader organizations is a “voluntarist” mistake that threatens to dissolve the core of revolutionaries in search of a non-existent broader left. Instead, it's better to wait it out and focus on building your own organization until struggles pick up.

That is always a possibility, but it is also an evasion. In place of critical thinking, it is a way of naturalizing the current forms of organization, which are not just reflections

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<sup>56</sup> Mike Ely, “Tiers of Communist Work: One Counter-Plan to Swamp & Sect,” <<http://kasamaproject.org/2010/09/08/tiers-of-communist-work-one-counter-plan-to-swamp-sect/>>.

<sup>57</sup> <[http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71\\_11\\_23.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_23.htm)>.

of current conditions but instead represent very specific products of a tortured history. Further, it assumes that once these conditions change, and struggles pick up, our current forms of organization will be able to change along with them. I am pessimistic about such prospects. And finally, there are absurd forms of “voluntarism” inherent in accepting the currently existing organization of the socialist left: it generates a hyperactivity in building your own group along with the idea that somehow a viable socialist movement will be built even though you essentially write off the rest of the existing socialist left. Socialists are all immensely motivated by the immense injustices we see in the world around us, and the even worse nightmares that we can see capitalism giving rise to in the future. We usually feel like we are in a constant race against time, and must build the movement (our groups) as urgently as possible. But what if we are constantly falling back in that race against time because we are losing people by virtue of our own self-imposed organizational limitations?

Even if it is the case that “micro-sects” are all that can be built now, then let them be less pretentious, less sectarian, more open to working with one another, and more aware of their own inherent weaknesses (not to demoralize them but rather to help better understand the role they might play). Let them critically evaluate all their methods, search out more effective forms, and really ask if they are preparing the way toward something better in the future. I don’t think this is asking too much, nor do I believe I am naïve to think that there are many people in today’s socialist groups open to such an approach.

The ideas I am putting forward appear to assume the existence of a broader layer of people who would be open to joining socialist groups, if only they were of a different form than what exists today. Is this the case or am I just daydreaming? I think that a substantial number of these people do exist, but having struggled for many years to build both the socialist movement, as well as other activist organizations, I’m also skeptical. The radical left is tiny, and no organizational schema is going to change that in the immediate future. But I’m also convinced that the numbers of people open to anti-capitalist and socialist ideas are growing under the impact of the economic crisis and the

mounting frustrations with the Obama administration's policies. Meanwhile, "the various sects have no attractive power."<sup>58</sup>

These people need a home, an organization where they can politically develop, share their experiences and ideas with others, learn the ropes of activism, get involved in campaigns, and promote socialist ideas (or even just broad anti-capitalist ones) in creative ways. The tiny socialist organizations in existence today provide some of this, but ultimately they are fulfilling semi-contradictory roles, recruiting people fresh to activism (let alone socialism) and yet trying to convince them of a very specific "line." This is in part a necessary evil, owing to the lack of mass organizations, particularly the lack of a mass left-wing political party. But ultimately, these roles are at odds with one another, and everyone suffers as a result. Those who are newly recruited to the socialist movement join groups with a full program that they cannot possibly understand. Meanwhile, the leading members ("cadre") in existing groups focus an inordinate amount of effort on "educating" these newer members, most of whom will leave for any number of reasons, foremost among them the difficulty of the political period we are in today and the overall weakness of the left. But they also leave because they understandably develop doubts about the particular organization they are building. The "education" process is unfortunately too often a top-down one, which may keep young people from feeling like they can make new and creative, qualitative contributions. Young activists or workers arrive in groups in which all the major decisions have already been made, and then feel compelled to defend them. It's like being handed a whole new, ill-fitting wardrobe – "Here, put this on" – and being expected to immediately grow into it. Some might, but most will feel uncomfortable and eventually discard it, and even get pissed off at whoever forced them to dress that way, or ashamed that they couldn't get themselves into shape for it. Since there is no alternative for them to join (aside from other tiny socialist groups who often have similar problems), this process can alienate them from the socialist movement altogether and thus cause the movement to lose even more precious resources.

Is the solution to this problem to do as some groups do and set a much higher bar for recruitment? Some groups have discussions with potential members that go on for a

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<sup>58</sup> Cochran.

year before they are approved for membership. And yet, these are often the same groups who end up burying themselves in mass movements, rarely raising the banner of socialism. The problem with this method is that, assuming there are many people out there right now who are interested in joining and becoming active in building the socialist movement, it would be good to get them involved right away, not to make them jump through hoops before they are authorized to help do it. And ideological appeals to socialism have an important place, particularly given the crisis of world capitalism today. That's not to say we need to be screaming "socialism" from the rooftops and thinking that's the best way to build the movement; rather, it will in large part arise organically out of mass struggles. Yet for a lot of people, the biggest problem with (some of) the "sects," more than any of the points I've raised above, is the fact that they are bold about raising the banner of socialism. I disagree: we need to continue to boldly raise that banner – but in new and creative ways, and in organizations that are broader than those that exist today!

Hal Draper argued in the early 1970s that the whole strategy of attempting to form membership organizations right now in the socialist movement was a mistake. This might seem counter-intuitive – what kind of organization doesn't have members? Who makes decisions? But his point was that the current membership organizations are inherently distorted by all the contradictions outlined above. You can recruit people to an organization, sure, but on what basis are they being recruited? And how does the emphasis on building a membership organization impact your relationship with those who are close to you politically, but might not be open to joining your group?

Instead of membership organizations, Draper called for the formation of political centers, which would focus on publishing socialist political literature. According to Draper, "A political center has an enormous advantage over the sect's National Committee or Central Committee which issues directives, theses, disciplinary cases, etc. to its micro-empire of mini-branches. That is: the former's relations with local clubs, socialist groups, trade-union groups, workers' groups, and individual activists can be infinitely varied and flexible. Meanwhile, the latter's relations are dichotomized into two types: with members, the relation rigidified by the by-laws; with non-members, a relation

hampered by an organizational barrier.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, a political center would be more capable of educating people about socialism, and actually putting forward and campaigning for a political line – which is the exact aim that most “sects” claim to have today, but which their organizational methods often prevent them from achieving.

It’s clearly not enough to just publish literature though. The essential question is: How do we best attract, organize, and train activists today? There has to be an attractive and healthy form of organization that people not only can join, but are actively encouraged to join. You can’t join a journal or a website or a blog. This is one of the advantages that the “sects” have on all their critics – and it’s an important one. At the very least, you can join them and try to build something, working closely with others. We need organizations, but of a different character. Too often, it feels like those who reject the “micro-sect” form go too far in the opposite direction, albeit for a variety of different reasons.

In place of national membership organizations, Draper’s position was that socialists should form local circles, in their workplaces, schools, or cities. Draper drew this conclusion from his own activism, as well as his study of the history of the Bolsheviks. Summarizing this history, he wrote, “In the preceding period, the preliminaries for a mass party had taken shape in Russia in the form not of sects but of local workers’ circles, which remained loose, and founded loose regional associations. They had not developed as branches of a central organization but autonomously, in response to social struggles – loosely.”<sup>60</sup> This makes a lot of sense, since the basis of all organizing is local (even in the age of the Internet, although the example of Russia also reflected the difficulties of establishing national links owing to police repression). Still, you are going to be building campaigns primarily with other local (and mainly non-socialist) activists, co-workers, community members, etc. Can you imagine the local circles that made up the Russian Social-Democratic movement in the 1890s (under conditions of police repression, where to even hold a meeting was a heroic task) splitting over the point at which the French Revolution turned repressive, or their position on Israel-Palestine (forgive my anachronism)? How can it possibly be correct that the best

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<sup>59</sup> Draper.

<sup>60</sup> Draper.

socialist activists and thinkers today are separated from one another because of similar obstacles created by the current form of organization?

Draper argued that these circles should establish loose national connections. In his opinion, they should

make contact with a political center that makes sense from your own point of view, for help in literature, advice, and outside linkups, and work with it to whatever extent you find useful. But there is no reason against having this relationship with more than one political center, if they suit your own political views. Such a political center may even be a sect; but if you do not join it, it relates to you only as one political center among others. This relationship is a hang-loose relationship: if you do not have a vote in deciding its affairs, it is likewise true that it cannot tell you what to do by exerting its sect ‘discipline’ over your own judgment. You do not erect an organizational barrier between you as the adherent of one sect and someone else who cleaves to another sect or none. In your work, you use whatever literature you wish, whatever their source. . . . If enough take this course to break up the sect system, that would be a good thing for the future potentialities of an American socialist movement. *There is a better chance of a genuine socialist movement arising out of such a hang-loose complex of relationships than out of the fossilized world of sects.*<sup>61</sup>

I tend to think he’s right, though such local circles would always have their own problems. What trends will dominate? How broad should they be? How to avoid a lowest common denominator approach that stifles debates? How to avoid them descending into a swamp, a place where anything goes and the theoretical level of the movement is lowered? How to avoid a state of paralysis, if no one can agree on what the circles should do? These are serious questions, showing how there is no simple path to a more effective socialist movement. However, they are problems that stem from the state of the left in the U.S. today. They can’t just be wished out of existence. “Political centers” should, as

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<sup>61</sup> Draper.

Draper argued, continue to exist, with the aim of providing guidance and political material for these local circles. Further, the local circles should be composed of people with at least some minimal points of agreement that allow them to work together.

I think there is a better chance of the movement not descending into a swamp under this approach than the current organizations, for many of the reasons I have outlined throughout this essay. It would help make clear what are the essential questions in the movement, which would arise out of discussions and debates on living struggles, rather than being accelerated by pre-defined differences between different sects. It would ideally help raise the theoretical level, rather than lowering it, and it would allow more good activists to work together, learning from one another, rather than being separated and all fighting separate battles.

### **The Road to a Socialist Movement**

*“All one can do is push in a direction in which one’s efforts will not be wasted, no matter what the outcome” – Hal Draper*

Am I trying to dream something into existence? Perhaps. In my defense, according to Lenin “a Bolshevik who does not dream is a bad Bolshevik.”<sup>62</sup> He cited the Russian writer Pisarev, who said, “The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream, if he attentively observes life, compares his observations with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasies. If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well.” In Lenin’s opinion, “Of this kind of dreaming there is unfortunately too little in our movement.”<sup>63</sup> Amen to that. We urgently need to build a movement that challenges leading activists in the socialist movement today to work together and think more critically; that welcomes new activists into the project and helps educate them and find their place; that attracts some of the best activists from a variety of

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in *Not By Politics Alone: The Other Lenin*, Tamara Deutscher, 20.

<sup>63</sup> Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*

movements and allows them to participate; and that effectively deploys the movement's resources in common struggles.

How do we get there? I realize that most of this essay has focused on criticizing the weaknesses of the currently existing forms of organization. This is not meant to demoralize those currently active in the socialist movement, but rather to encourage critical thinking. As I've stated though, mere criticism is not enough – one also has to put forward an alternative, which is quite difficult. I don't have a blueprint for what a different socialist movement would look like, and I think it will require a creative exchange of ideas involving people who are much more gifted organizers and thinkers than I. I merely hope to catalyze such a discussion by making it clear that what exists is, in my opinion, both unacceptable and not inevitable. Finding new forms will also take concrete experimentation and critical evaluation, alongside ongoing developments in society. One of the most promising recently was the Dan LaBotz's socialist campaign for Senate in Ohio, which brought together activists from a number of different groups and has now led to the formation of the Buckeye Socialist Network.<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, here are some ideas for potential forms a new socialist movement could take<sup>65</sup>:

- A common website, newspaper, and/or journal, with the aim of posting important news, reports on struggles, socialist and radical analysis, and serving as a forum for *debate* and organizing ideas
- A collaboration to organize a roster of talented speakers on a variety of issues and work together on building big events for them around the country. Instead of poorly organized, poorly attended events with poor presentations, these could be big forums which inspire people to activism. The roster of speakers could include people like Dahr Jamail, Chris Hedges, Cindy Sheehan, Glenn Greenwald (who is speaking at the ISO's Socialism 2011 conference in Chicago) important figures from struggles internationally, etc.

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<sup>64</sup> <<http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/node/3129>>.

<sup>65</sup> For more concrete solutions, and an idea of what a healthy socialist organization might look like, I like the ideas outlined in Proyect's essay, "What type of party do we need?" <<http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2009/03/22/what-kind-of-party-do-we-need/>>.

- Big regional and nationwide socialist conferences, along the lines of the ISO's Socialism Conference in Chicago (and the Bay Area) but even bigger and better. These could be geared not only toward socialist education but also toward developing action proposals and ideas. The fact that no initiative like this has developed in recent years is somewhat disturbing, though understandable given the logic that I've outlined.
- Joint study groups and classes in local areas (or via the Internet), socialist education centers, etc.
- Local groups of activists who join together to work on common campaigns, or report on all the different work they're involved in, even if they are from different political trends

There is no magic formula for the constitution of a more effective American socialist movement. It will likely involve a variety of different types of organizational efforts, combined with a growth in struggles by workers and youth on any number of issues. I am putting forward all these ideas because I think they hold potential for building a sounder foundation for this process.<sup>66</sup>

On what political basis might this all come together? It might seem ridiculous that I am only bringing that point up now, since in many ways it is the central one. Have I abandoned politics in search of organizational shortcuts? Have I jettisoned any concept of a shared program or perspectives as the basis for working together?<sup>67</sup> I haven't, but I felt

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<sup>66</sup> Inevitably, the objection will be raised that similar projects to what I'm proposing have been tried around the globe, thus far with limited success. In the late 1990s, the founding of the Scottish Socialist Party was seen as a hugely promising development by many on the left, but it has failed to live up to its potential. In Australia, the Democratic Socialist Party has dissolved itself into the Socialist Alliance, partly to exert "moral pressure" on the rest of the left to do similarly, after reaching many of the same conclusions I have. Yet the Socialist Alliance also seems to be struggling to develop. In France, the LCR dissolved itself into the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA). All these developments are still playing themselves out, and we will have to see where they go. Honestly, I personally am not in a position to give much of an assessment of them at this point, though I plan to write about them in the very near future. However, independent of these developments, I have come to the conclusion that the current forms of organization of the socialist movement in the U.S. cannot continue. That point is not dependent on the success of efforts to build a broader party elsewhere, though it can be informed by them. In my opinion, even if these new efforts don't succeed, that should not be taken as a vindication of the current forms of organization, or of those who seek to hold back from efforts to build a broader organization.

<sup>67</sup> Regardless, the current forms of organization actually hinder the development of groupings with clear, agreed upon political perspectives. If someone leaves over a relatively minor disagreement, which may be primarily organizational rather than political, it's as if they've been launched into another galaxy.

that the most essential questions to focus on in this piece were organizational. As should be clear from all of the above, I think there have to be better vehicles for the discussion of a program and perspectives than what currently exist.

Imagine if several of the currently existing groups, along with unaffiliated socialists, agreed to approach the questions we face from a fresh perspective, without bringing their organizational baggage with them. Wouldn't it be possible to take a fresh look at the situation we face in the U.S., clarify our tasks, and find common points of agreement on which we could build some type of united organization or project? Isn't it at least worth a shot, as an experiment?

Besides, what do we *really* have to lose?

I am hopeful that this piece will help generate discussion of the sort necessary to developing a healthy, attractive socialist movement. As Bert Cochran put it back in 1956, "If we can find the inner resources to unravel this knotty riddle of our lifetime, then we have the chance to reconstruct the movement on sturdier foundations and along more mature lines, and the challenge of democratic socialism, compelling and clear, can again be flung into the market place – where it has unnecessarily been absent far too long."<sup>68</sup> The task remains, and it's time we set ourselves to work.

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Discussions with them usually cease, owing to a number of factors ranging from guilt to the hyper-focus of all resources on building your organization. You end up left with a much smaller pool of people – those who you can convince to stick around inside your organization – thus making you ask yourself, "Why don't more people agree with us?" It makes building support for your politics seem even more difficult (if not hopeless) than it should be!

Meanwhile, you're stuck in your own group with people who you might have more disagreements with, and who might be much less capable or influential activists than those who agree with you on most questions but are not willing to join your organization. You end up focusing an inordinate amount of time on debating with them and working with them, since at least they agree on building your organization. This is the perverse logic of the current organizational forms.

<sup>68</sup> *American Socialist*, 1956, <[http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/amersocialist/amersoc\\_5611.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/amersocialist/amersoc_5611.htm)>.