

Working Evaluation of the So. California Local Center

Developing Conception of the Local Center

The first call for the establishment of local centers came from the national steering committee in their June '78 minutes. They called for local centers to be established wherever possible and formed according to local conditions. The 18 principles would be the political basis of unity of the centers. In this mailing the purpose of the local centers was primarily to "bring together all adherents of the OC for regular meetings and discussion of the questions being taken up on the national level." Building unity with forces that agree with the 18 points but stand outside the OCIC" was clearly a secondary priority.

In August we received a mailing that laid out a list of tasks for the local centers and defined the purpose of the local centers as providing "focal points for the conception, politics, and activities of the OC. This means that they would have to take up a broad number of tasks, ranging from developing a public presence for the OC in their particular locality to maintaining contact with other M-L forces in the area." The national s.c. began to put a greater focus on outreach which coincided with the primary purpose they laid out for the OC in its founding statement around the same time: "Its primary purpose is to facilitate drawing as much of the anti-left tendency as possible into actively defining the character of the ideological center and elaborating a plan for its development."

Southern California was particularly fertile ground for the development of a local center because OCIC forces were not in the same cadre organization. OC members were organized into two small groupings and one organization. For several months, So. California OC forces had been meeting occasionally. They summed up the February Conference, put together a bibliography of available trend literature, planned for distribution of literature at events, and coordinated CN's upcoming visit. When the mailings on the local center arrived, most OC forces strongly supported the proposal. SOC had been in the lead of doing outreach work with OC forces and others; and had pushed L.A. people to do the same. The proposal for local centers had particularly high stakes for the L.A. comrades, who belonged to no trend cadre organization. They saw the effort to build a local center here as an opportunity for testing and building the trend's presence in the area. They understood that by identifying forces who agreed with the 18 points, they might find people who they would be able to unify with in a L.A. trend cadre organization. A struggle was waged and won in the LAWG for members to stay in L.A. and try to help build a local center here.
for the next period

CN's September visit was a turning point in the development of a local center in SO. California. He met with SOC and the two groupings individually---helping each group to sort out various internal

contradictions. He met with representatives from SOC, LAOC, and LAWG together to lay out a plan for developing a local center. (See "Report on a Plan for the L.C.", 9/2/78). The plan itself focused too much on the internal structure of the local center steering committee; and not enough on the local center, the ideological center and the ideological questions involved in developing each. The plans emphasized guidelines for setting up the committee, and criteria for selecting the chairperson. CN identified three primary tasks for the local center; the first concerned with outreach, and the other two with consolidation of OC forces. In this plan, the three were presented as having equal importance.

Within the discussion, CN clarified the importance of clearly distinguishing the two processes of building the local center, and building a cadre organization. He saw the processes as developing in tandem. It was important to keep them distinct so that the ability of the local center to attract people on the basis of unity of the 18 points would not be compromised by the higher basis of unity needed for a cadre organization. He did point out the dialectical relationship between the two. The center would create the context for forces to come together to do common work. Through this process of political unification, some cadre would be recruited to an organization. On the other hand, the key to the continued success of the local center would be the support and guidance of a strong OCIC cadre organization committed to building an ideological center.

Cn also introduced us to the role that local centers could play in combatting federationsim by providing a non-sectarian form for a broad range of forces to unify politically around the 18 points. He stressed that we must learn to always put the interests of the communist movement as a whole over the short term interests of any one organization. He pointed out that although the two might appear to be in conflict at times, serving the broader tendency would insure the advancement of cadre organizations.

We had only one session with CN in which he laid out the plan to us. Because of lack of time and prior commitments, we weren't able to have a follow up session with him in order to discuss the implications of the plan and the direction it would take in our work locally. We think that it was a mistake not to have this kind of discussion between the national and the local before we undertook the task of trying to build a local center.

The plan was not developed and adopted easily by the representatives. There was a lot of struggle. But through that struggle we failed to identify and resolve essential issues. Important issues that were implicit throughout the struggle for a plan, but not properly drawn out, discussed, and resolved were 1) the role of local centers in building an Ideological center, 2) the role of organizations, groupings, and individuals in the process 3) the role of leadership of the local center 4) the relationship of the

two tasks laid out by CN---outreach and internal consolidation. These same issues arose again and again throughout the life of the local center. Our failure to correctly identify them and work to resolve them hurt the progress of "our" work.

Because we did not focus on these important issues, the mistaken conceptions of a participant in the steering committee continued without being properly challenged. During the plan discussion, these conceptions were unclear, and were veiled by a stubborn opposition to adopting a plan, and to selecting a steering committee chair person. Looking back we see two of these incorrect positions. 1) Conception of the local center as a coalition of organizations. This implicitly denied the role of individuals in the process and explicitly denied the primacy of political struggle and unity over organizational strength. 2) The assumption that initial local center leadership would necessarily become secondary party leadership---not by virtue of its political leadership, but because of its organizational status. Our failure to recognize these federationist errors, meant that they would continue to play a harmful role in developing the local center.

During the plan discussion---instead of focusing on how to adopt the plan to our local conditions, and discussing the role of local centers in our general party building perspective; we debated whether we should have a plan at all. Instead of defining broadly and specifically the role of organizations, groupings, and individuals in the process; we debated only one aspect of an organizations role and partially resolved it (see page one, No. 2 of "Proposed Plan for the So. California Local Center" 10/25/78). Instead of fully discussing and developing our understanding of what we needed from local center leadership in the present period, and how that might differ from the demands on leadership further on down the road; we initially debated on whether we needed a chair or not. We were able to get this discussion back on track. Although the issue was not generally resolved, we did arrive at a satisfactory conception of leadership for the immediate period in our specific conditions. We selected temporary co-chairs who represented both geographical areas and represented an organization and a small grouping. We also agreed that leadership of the local center would be a strong collective responsibility for all steering committee participants.

Like the plan itself, leadership of the plan discussion tended to be bureaucratic instead of political in nature. We primarily dealt with the internal organizational aspect of setting up the local center steering committee. This led to two errors. 1) We didn't adequately take up the essential political questions involved in building the ideological center and the local center. 2) By focusing on the steering committee, we didn't pay proper attention to two more important organizational forms---the local center at large and the ideological center.

Outreach in the Last Period

We spent a considerable amount of time and effort on outreach in the local center from the beginning. Our first event was the Newlin-Silber Debate. This gave us a weak start because it was not a good general introduction to the efforts of the OCIC to build an ideological center, and to our general perspective on party building. We followed the debate with an informational mailing and a social gathering. No new forces from the debate came to the gathering, but it was a good opportunity for OCIC people to talk with SMG and Guardian people. We held a forum with the Guardian Club on their party building paper. We selected literature, ordered it, and distributed it to bookstores, events and individual discussions. We worked with and talked with anti-imperialist groups (SASC, NICH, PRSC). We participated in a Capital study group---and through it built unity with people from SMG, PCIC, the Guardian, NICH and other independents. We had discussions on the local center with SMG. We had discussions with a grouping in San Diego. We contacted a member of the J.P. Stevens Boycott Committee.

However, characteristic of our work generally, our outreach work was primarily internal to the local center steering committee. That is, we spent a fair amount of time identifying and assessing forces, but active contact was uneven and ideological exchange was limited. In addition, with the exception of the Guardian Forum, we did not actively draw in other OCIC forces into outreach work.

The limits on our outreach work were the results of several problems. Number One was that we were never ideologically unified around what we were bringing people into. We did not study, discuss, struggle and politically unify around either the local center or the ideological center. We did not use internal education in the local center to help develop this analysis.

Secondly, we didn't understand how protracted a process developing unity with people in the broader tendency would be. Somehow we all thought that it was going to be a lot easier and go a lot faster. We need to be clear what a dramatic impact revisionist and ultra-left party building efforts have had on people. People have been burned by these errors, and they're going to be cautious about joining any party building process. It's crucial for us to deepen our critique of revisionism and ultra-leftism, and clearly formulate how our effort breaks with them. Developing a conscious and unified non-sectarian approach to our work is also key.

Another thing that we didn't understand about outreach was the important role that our practice as OCIC people with forces in the broader tendency would play in drawing people closer to the local center. In our effort to make the local center avoid directly guiding practice (which we agree it should not do); we failed to pay enough attention to encouraging our members to engage in practical activity, and to sum up the relationships and political unity built through it.

The basis of unity of the local center is the ideological center. The local center for political activity in terms of organizational development in the party building process.

The basis of unity of the OCIC is the 18 principles, the commitment to build an ideological center, and a party building perspective which calls for political unity instead of organizational hegemony. Some will be drawn to the OCIC through reading and hearing about this basis of unity. But many will be drawn to the OCIC by experiencing this non-sectarian approach to party building in practice. When we started out, we over estimated what the impact would be on people of printing up the 18 points and the founding statement, and distributing them. We thought doing public raps on the ideological center would be a big draw. Presentations, discussions, and debates surely play an important role in the life of the local center; particularly when relationships are built to a certain extent. But putting these anti-revisionist, anti-ultra left politics into practice in anti-imperialist work, anti-racist work, community and trade union work, and other forms of mass work will also play a significant role in building ideological unity with others.

A drawback to our work was that initially none of the LA OCIC people were involved in mass work with other communists outside of trade union work. This has changed significantly in the last period.

Participation in the SASC has built ideological unity with individuals from PCIC and Echo Park on principle 18 and on a non-sectarian approach to party building. The Weber work has given us the opportunity to build and deepen ideological unity with SMG, PCIC, Guardian, left of NAM, People's College of Law, independents, advanced workers and community people on the centrality of the struggle against racism externally and internally, how to struggle against women's oppression, and what a non-sectarian style of work is. The Weber work has given OCIC forces the concrete opportunity to struggle against racism in the area, and to deepen our understanding of how to wage the struggle against racism in ourselves. It should be clear that the local center itself should not direct this practical work, but it can endorse it. Individuals from the local center can represent the OCIC as they build political unity with others on the basis of common work. The local center can sponsor forums that sum up the work, its strengths and weaknesses, and its significance in our party building efforts.

Perhaps N is the clearest example of the impact of us neglecting two important aspects of outreach work---1) ideologically unifying ourselves around what we were trying to draw people into and 2) the importance of our practical work in building unity with others. N has a rich history of experience and relationships in anti-imperialist work. She wasn't able to use these in the last period, because she gave up this practical work in order to give more attention to the internal workings of the steering committee. When she did have conversations with people, she never felt unified enough around what the IC and the LC were, to develop and draw these contacts into the OCIC.

We do not want to belittle the work we have accomplished in outreach. We have succeeded in establishing a public presence for the OCIC in mass work and in ideological work. We have begun to

develop good political relationships with developed minority Marxist-Leninists who consider themselves a part of the tendency, and who are interested in the development of an ideological center. We've developed contact with a grouping in San Diego. Through various channels and areas of work, we've interested a number of individuals and representatives into entering a series of discussions with us introducing the OCIC. We've helped build West Coast regional ties. We've selected and made available key tendency literature.

Internal Education in the Last Period

Although our process was internal, we did not spend qualitative time in the steering committee on our own internal education or that of OCIC members generally. We did not relate the needs of our outreach work to our need for internal education. We should have concentrated our efforts on the nature of the Ideological Center, the Local Center and the 18 principles. We should have worked at developing unity on what a non-sectarian style of work is. Part of what held us back was the fact that the national s.c. did not send us materials and guidance on these issues in a timely way. We had expected materials much earlier. We had expected ideological guidance that did not come. But this is clearly secondary to our to our own failure to take up this task on our own seriously, to use what materials were available, and to request guidance when we needed it.

We should have worked at defining the role of the local centers in party building generally, and specifically to this period. We should have worked out the role of organizations and individuals in the process from one period to the next. Without clarity on these issues (and without them being the content of our educational work) our efforts to extend internal education to all OCIC members in the area was blocked by unresolved conflict over what educational role the local center could play.

Our most successful attempt at internal education was our preparation for the Point 18 conference. At the time there were seven developed OCIC individuals without an organization and SOC. An L.A. local center s.c. member, aided by an SOC member planned the local center preparation. Representatives from SOC attended with all L.A. people. In this way L.A. people and SOC people were allowed to benefit from joint discussions; and SOC members were prepared in the deeper, more protracted way that their organization was capable of offering. SOC also used the L.A. presenter's outline of discussion internally as a good model of sharing materials and perspectives. Internal education must move from the shallower to the deeper according to the specific issue, the assessment of the needs of OCIC forces in that period, and the capabilities of the local center.

Relationship of the Two Tasks

We see one of our biggest mistakes as not understanding and implementing the dialectical relationship between outreach and internal education. The two tasks were often treated as opposing and competing tasks. We didn't realize that we couldn't do good outreach work without deepening and unifying our understanding of the basic ideological unity of the OCIC. Neither did we understand that we could best strengthen our grasp of these issues in our efforts to break them down and sum them up with people in the broader tendency.

Further, we understand that different periods in developing the ideological center will demand that the local center put a stronger emphasis on one task over another. In this period, when the primary purpose of the OCIC is to draw "as much of the anti-left tendency as possible into actively defining the character of the ideological center and elaborating a plan for its development" (Founding Statement), we see our work centering around ideological education, struggle and exchange with the anti-left tendency as a whole around the 18 principles and the development of an ideological center. As the ideological center and the local center develop and mature, internal education and ideological struggle on theoretical issues which go beyond this broad framework will come to the fore.

The relationship between the two tasks must also be based on an assessment locally of the forces present and their needs. For example, the need to identify a new direction for the local center here recently was raised clearly by a dramatic shift in forces. 1) The SMG, a theoretically developed group of Marxist-Leninists decided not to join the OCIC or the l.c. because they had not sufficiently studied the question of party building. 2) Most of the OCIC individuals in L.A. are moving towards joining SOC. We clearly had to put a priority on outreach which would draw new forces in to help build and develop the direction of the local center and the OCIC as a whole.

The other important factor determining the relationship between tasks is the practical ability of forces present to do the work, and the capability of the local center to take on different functions. The next period will demand a great deal from us in drawing forces into our work. A new emphasis on individuals that we have contacted must be implemented. Introduction discussions must be launched. Eighteen points study and discussion may follow. Our understanding of the role individuals can play in the l.c. must consciously deepen. A systematic approach to the organizations we are in contact with must be established. This will demand setting up a division of labor, defining the theoretical questions that are key in our relationship with each, and figuring out how to best build unity with the SMG, PCIC, the Network, the San Diego people, etc. Clearly one issue that will be important is the current national debate between Network and OCIC forces. Our outreach work in this period will help define what internal education we must take up.

We do encourage joint theoretical work that goes beyond the broad framework of the OCIC among member OCIC organizations, individuals, and other forces in the tendency whenever possible. This may include sharing materials and perspectives; conducting joint study, discussions and writing, etc. Previous to forming the ideological center, this would be an informal process beyond the work of the local center.

Our General Conception of the Local Center

We are unified around the conception of the local center as a non-sectarian form that can draw people into a process of developing an ideological center. The process is based upon the importance of political struggle and unity instead of organizational hegemony. Organizations, groupings, and individuals will be able to participate on the basis of their unity with the 18 principles. We see the local center developing from the shallower to the deeper on several levels. As more forces are drawn into the local center and our political unity develops and deepens; as local centers develop nationally; and as national guidance advances; the ability of the local center to become an arena for ideological struggle and unity for the tendency will further materialize. The So. California local center steering committee is committed to aiding all three of these efforts.

A Summary of our Strengths and Weaknesses in the Last Period

Strengths

1. An important arena for bringing together and beginning to unify politically OCIC forces in So. California.
2. We began to give a more cohesive stronger presence to the OCIC locally through our outreach work.
3. We began to contribute to the national process; primarily through our work of trying to build a local center, and identifying the contradictions we face.
4. We've increased our understanding of a number of important questions involved in party building: For example, the relationship between national and local work, how to develop a non-sectarian approach to party building work, the problem of federationsim and how to struggle against it.
5. We've helped develop regional ties on the West Coast.
6. We've helped put the western region in a stronger position to the national process.
7. We developed good collective leadership skills among steering committee participants.

Weaknesses (Because we think that much can be learned both locally and nationally from the mistakes we have made, we've elaborated on our weaknesses.)

1. We functioned primarily internally as a steering committee instead of building a real local center which paid attention to the needs of and drew on the resources of all OCIC members in the area; and who actively drew people from the broader tendency in.
2. We didn't grasp the dialectic between internal education and outreach work. The two tasks were often treated as opposing and competing tasks. We didn't realize that we couldn't do good outreach work without deepening and unifying our understanding of the basic ideological unity of the OCIC. Neither did we understand that we could best strengthen our grasp of these issues in our efforts to break them down and sum them up with people in the broader tendency.
3. We didn't try to unify ideologically around the continuing process of defining an ideological center nor did we consciously work at uniting around a conception of the local center in building an ideological center (until recently). Not doing so hurt all areas of our work. It hurt our outreach work because we had real difficulty in putting forward a unified conception of what we were trying to bring people into. It held back our ability to relate to all OCIC forces as members of the local center. This was because we weren't unified around a conception of the local center itself and what roles member organizations, groupings and individuals had to play in it. Without this ideological unification, we were unable to successfully combat tendencies towards sectarianism and federationsim when they arose in our work.
4. We didn't develop and maintain a strong enough tie between the local center and the local trend cadre organization. This was the result of a weakness in both bodies. The leadership body of SOC did not keep in strong touch with the local center process. They did not give their cadre involved sufficient guidance. They allowed a division between the two SOC representatives to obstruct the process without helping to resolve it. On the other hand the local center steering committee did not push SOC for stronger involvement in the local center. We did not raise the issue to a principled level by defining the leading role that an OCIC organization must play in building and supporting the local center. This weak link hurt our work because it set back our struggle to develop a viable conception of the local center, and because it contributed to the condition of all SOC members not participating actively in the life of the local center.
5. We tended to apply CN's plan mechanically. We paid too much attention to the internal structure of the s.c. set out in the plan. We failed to deal with the larger ideological questions involved in trying to initiate a local center. We failed to take into consideration our changing local conditions. We needed to be more flexible about the plan as forces and conditions changed.

We treated the tasks laid out in the plan as competing and equal tasks. We failed to identify their inter-relationship and the primacy of each in a given period of time.

6. National guidance has been minimal. We were operating by a plan that assumed strong national guidance. We need national guidance that is given with an understanding of our concrete conditions and the roles that local centers can play in different stages of building, an ideological center.
7. Although we sent detailed minutes of our meetings to the national, we were unable to accurately analyze the contradictions we were facing and ask for specific guidance from the national. We failed to criticize the national steering committee for their lack of guidance and for their idealistic appraisal of our situation.
8. All of the above factors, and in particular our failure to unify on the nature of the local center and ideological center, hurt our ability to combat the primary ideological error confronting us in the steering committee. The basis of this incorrect line was federalism and sectarianism. The line championed organizational consolidation above political unity in the tendency. It saw the local center as an administrative body for a coalition of organizations, instead of a form for building political unity among all members of the tendency. It recommended that the local center be subordinate to the cadre organization, and feared that the local center would subordinate the cadre organization; instead of elaborating how the two could help each other develop. The style this line was presented with was both sectarian and obstructionist.
9. We didn't understand the important relationship between our members' participation in mass work and building ideological unity with forces in the broader tendency. We should have encouraged members to engage in practical activity, and to sum up the relationships and political unity built through it.

Towards the effort to build an ideological center,
Comradely,

So. California Local Center Steering Committee

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