

# Towards a Perspective for the 1980s

## Introduction

This is not a perspective document. It is rather a discussion paper that attempts to deal with our past experience, some of the major events and trends that form the backdrop of any perspective, some of the major tasks facing revolutionary socialists, and some of the things we need to do to render ourselves fit to deal with the period we face. Obviously, the first step in this process is to open a broad discussion on perspectives. It is hoped this document will provoke that discussion and that it will be received as a substantial contribution to it, but it makes no pretense to be the final product of that discussion.

Some of the ideas in this document were discussed at the IS Summer Conference. But that discussion failed to focus on our primary tasks or on the forces that we see as allies and how they relate not only to building the rank and file movements and the fight for a labor party, but to building a socialist movement in the working class. This document tries to tie some of these things together.

This document proposes no specific timetable. It is obvious that some of the tasks proposed are more long range than others, and some of the political possibilities that are projected still seem remote. In part, for example in the case of the labor party, the task seems remote because there is no simple way to integrate it into our way of functioning in the unions that seems realistic at the moment. This, in my opinion, only points out that we will have to change or expand on some of our political habits as we see greater political possibilities inherent in the objective situation. This document doesn't contain any detail on which habits need to change, or how to change them. This will have to come out of the discussion and out of new experiences we will have in the coming years.

The author solicits responses, counter-documents, or whatever. Hopefully, our new Bulletin can be a vehicle for this discussion.

—Kim Moody

## 1. Assessment of the Past

From 1974 through 1978 the IS set out to build the "embryo of the party." Styling ourselves as a workers' combat organization, we operated on a party-building perspective that called for a high degree of centralism and voluntarism in the belief that the results would be big and come soon. The perspective argued that the undeniable return of crisis to world capitalism would produce a militant response from the working class, that the traditional, reformist leadership of the class would prove inadequate to the times, and that revolutionaries positioned in the working class could fill the "vacuum of leadership." In this process workers would become open to socialist ideas, see the efficacy of our organization in the class struggle, and join the IS in significant numbers.

We saw this process not only in the US, but in Europe as well. The growth of the revolutionary left in Europe was the evidence of the international character of this process. In the US, the rise of militancy in the late '60s and the burst of rank and file struggle and organization in the early '70s was evidence that even the US would not escape this process. Our initial successes from 1975-76 confirmed for us that the perspective was correct, and the corollary belief that we could do it all alone.

By 1978 it was clear that the perspective had failed. We lost most of the workers, Black and white, that we had recruited. We experienced our second major split of the decade and were heading towards a smaller one. Much of the leadership of the group was burned, some were lost to the organization. Branch functioning declined. The IS entered the '80s in bad shape and without a clear perspective to replace the old one.

On balance, it is important to recognize that

unlike many other organizations which attempted to build the party, the IS did not collapse. Its world view and basic politics did not disintegrate. Furthermore, our trade union work was strong and durable. We had some set-backs where the industrial rug got pulled out from under us, as in auto, but we were not forced to withdraw from the working class or to deny our fundamental belief that revolutionary socialists can be effective working class leaders, can gain the respect of significant numbers of worker activists, can gain a hearing for socialist ideas. These gains have confirmed the core of our agitational method and the theoretical notion from which it flows, namely that the revolutionary process grows out of the self-activity of the working class. Most basic to a perspective for the '80s is to chart a course for building on our successes. But it would be difficult to do that effectively without coming to grips with our failures.

Our understanding of the crisis of capitalism as an economic phenomenon was certainly proved correct by events. Not that every prediction we made in our annual convention documents was right, but our understanding of the crisis as a fundamental one based on the laws of motion of capitalism and the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, leading to prolonged stagnation coupled with inflation, the return of the "business cycle," and the intensification of the employers offensive, has been confirmed again and again.

But on the political side, we mischaracterized the period.

The general political view of the '70s as one of revolutionary formations within the working class, a view we shared with an international network of groups, was not borne out anywhere. The early promise of the revolutionary left in Europe collapsed by the end of the '70s. The IS groups did not grow

significantly within the working class; no Trotskyist group has emerged as a serious force anywhere, and Maoism appears to have virtually self-destructed.

The real gainer in Europe has been left reformism. The European working class has spent ten or twelve years breaking with Stalinism and the right-wing social democracy of post-WWII Europe only to recreate left social democracy — first as Eurocommunism in some countries and now as the real article.

In the US no explicitly socialist, let alone revolutionary, trend of any size has emerged in the working class. This international phenomenon cannot be explained by a lack of militance or the absence of struggle. There has been plenty of militance at various times in Europe and Canada, but still no revolutionary party of significance.

Underlying the revolutionary left's failure to dig roots and develop troops in the working class, and also underlying the growth of left reformism in Europe, is a central feature of the crisis that we overlooked until recently. *The contours of capitalist crisis and change have produced a change in the balance of power between the institutions of capital and labor internationally.* Ironically, the very motor of the crisis, the falling rate of profit, has driven capital toward greater and greater centralization, concentration and internationalization. Consequently the level, size and scope of the organization of capital has altered the balance of organization between capital and labor that emerged from WWII and that lay behind class relations for a quarter of a century. The effects of this changing balance of forces, of course, differs from country to country according to the variations in political traditions of all classes, level of organization prior to the change, degree of unionization and so on.

In many countries this has produced an attack on living and working conditions. Typically this means a government austerity program, sometimes in collusion with the union leadership. In Britain, Canada and the US, it has meant an attack on unionism as it has been practiced since WWII. As has usually been the case throughout history, the working class or the majority of its activists turn in the first instance to their traditional organizations and parties. Tony Cliff has shown, in a 1979 article in *International Socialism*, the response to the attack on the steward system and on the power of the unions has tended to flow into the political realm providing the base for Bennism — particularly because so many of the industrial struggles are being lost. In Italy, the powerful shop floor organizations of the late '60s have declined under attack, leading, for a time, to the growth of the Italian Communist Party. Whatever the particular form it has taken, and usually it is very complex, the basic pattern seems clear. The changing balance of forces, including the effects of international competition (job loss, plant closings, etc.) has led working class activists at the base to turn to organizations and parties that seemed big enough to be able to actually resist the effects of the crisis. Nowhere was the revolutionary left large enough to hold out this promise. The vacuum of leadership theory in which the IS international net

work believed did not come true because the various reformist trends were willing to hold out the promise that they were changing and could thus become vehicles for resistance to capital's offensive. Whatever Eurocommunism may have meant for intellectuals, for workers it meant the promise of democratized organizations capable of dealing with their problems. When one traditional organization failed the test, the workers turned to another. In France the CP has been deserted in favor of a spruced up, left-facing SP. In Britain, the relatively new phenomenon of Bennism and the Alternative Economic Strategy have provided the vehicle. In Denmark new left reformist parties have grown in recent years.

It would appear that the working class of any nation does not turn to revolution until it has abandoned or exhausted the more cautious and "practical" alternatives. In the US, as we shall discuss later, this fact explains both the growth of trade union reform movements and the conservative loyalty to the old leaders that is often a barrier to the reformers.

For us, this phenomenon meant that there was not a "vacuum" of leadership. Indeed, it is doubtful that leadership "vacuums" ever exist. What did exist and what explains our various trade union successes, were failures of traditional union leadership. Where the gap between the demands of the workers and the promises of leadership by the bureaucrats was great, as in the IBT and to a lesser extent USWA, the revolutionaries could become credible leaders. Where this gap in leadership was less apparent, as in the UAW, things were more difficult, at least nationally.

Thus, the agitational method is not wrong. What was wrong was the notion that, on the one hand, the workers would turn to the revolutionaries right away, and on the other, that the traditional leaderships would be totally incapable of providing any credible leadership. The situation here is different from Europe because the demands and expectations of the workers themselves are so low. A leadership gap, after all, depends not only on the quality of leadership, or its lack of quality, but on what the workers are asking of that leadership. Our overestimation of the period included an overestimation of the demands American workers would make on their unions, and what solutions they would accept as viable. For steel and auto workers, for example, protectionism still represents a viable solution for job security for many. Of course, the needs and desires of workers are more complex than their position on one issue. Hence there are other matters around which workers will turn to alternative leaders. So far, in the US this has meant either a move to the right among some white workers in the political realm (Moral Majority, Klan, etc.) or to union reformers in the realm of union politics. The complexities of all of this can be seen in District 31 of the USWA where the reformers have much support, but where Balanoff lost and the vote to keep ENA was 9 to 1. The point is that while the idea that revolutionaries can lead struggles and gain a hearing from workers in motion (our agita-



tional method) remains true, the simplistic notion that there are absolute vacuums in leadership ready made for us was — and is — wrong.

In the context of American politics and class relations the fact that workers turn to their traditional institutions is largely positive. It is the basis of the concept of a rank and file movement. But the ways in which workers carry this out are dependent on the unique problems of the American working class. To a greater degree than almost anywhere else in the capitalist world, the US working class has no independent class conscious traditions, no explicitly socialist traditions in its collective memory, and enormously weakened organizational skills. This is not to say that there have not been socialist workers, strong shop floor organization, democratic unions, or other such things at various points in the history of the American working class. It is not something in the "national character" or the genetic pool of the class! Rather, it is that these historical traditions have been effectively wiped from the memory of the class. Socialist and/or other class conscious ideas (old SP, IWW) do not bear on the thinking of American workers, they do not form the way American workers respond to the crisis or the changing balance of class forces. To a greater degree than workers in most countries American workers approach these questions within the framework of bourgeois ideas of various sorts, in particular those that tend to deny class as a political category. The closest thing to class consciousness in the current memory of the American working class and its activists is the CIO of the '30s.

As Hal Draper points out in his study of Marxism, *Karl Marx's Theory of Social Revolution*, the development and growth of class consciousness is largely dependent on the level of independent class organization. Without independent class organizations, class consciousness is not likely to be deep or enduring. The marginalization of shop floor organization as a source of independent power together with the bureaucratization of the unions generally have left the American working class with a very weak and shallow organizational infrastructure. Organization and political skills have, to some degree, been monopolized by the bureaucrats and their friends. Weak organizational traditions, combined with minimal class consciousness (i.e., trade union consciousness) mean that even in terms of turning to traditional organizations (unions) or in attempting to make them vehicles for the defense of their living standards, everything here happens with greater difficulty and generally more slowly than elsewhere. Of course, there can be explosive episodes in this process. 1970 was one. Such episodes can move things forward and open things up. But they still occur in the context of organizational and political weakness. Hence gains were not always lasting. Again look at 1970: Miners for Democracy, TURF, postal strike, Teamster wildcat. A couple years later the organizations were gone and in some cases the militancy as well. The spirit of MFD, the black lung strike, etc. were channeled into the structure of the union and partly defeated. Postal militancy later expressed itself, indirectly,

through Sombrotto and Biller, rather than strikes — and it took a decade for this to happen.

Things do not stand still. The various reform movements of the '70s and of today have produced more organization, more political skills and more class consciousness among more workers. The process does move forward. But we vastly overestimated the speed at which the American working class, to use Marx's phrase, "makes itself fit to rule." Like any working class in the world it does go through this process. But it starts from a lower level and finds it more difficult. Rather than believing we could hothouse the revolutionary party in a matter of years, we should have understood the role that revolutionaries must play in advancing the organization and consciousness, and hence advancing the political possibilities of the future, of the class. The illusion that leadership vacuums would provide the opportunity to leap over history, producing a brand new shiny revolutionary class, was a costly one.

## 2. The 1980s — The Context

Historically, severe capitalist crisis has often produced a shift in the balance of forces between capital and labor. The crisis of the mid-1890s, for example, produced a vast merger movement and a growing internationalization of capital. These changes in the organization of capital had far-reaching effects on politics and class relations in the US and Britain, the two cases I am familiar with. In both those cases, the huge growth in the size and audacity of capital, along with visible redistribution of wealth in favor of capital, produced a wave of unionization, and sharpened class struggle. In Britain the birth of the labor party was a product of this period. In the US, the Socialist Party provided a smaller political channel. In both cases, severe defeats in trade union struggles gave rise to class conscious political movements. This era culminated with the end of WWI. Again in both nations there was an explosion of trade union struggle and the development of a workers control movement (shop stewards in Britain, "systems committees" and other cross-union workplace bodies in the US) led by people who viewed themselves as revolutionaries (and supported Soviet Russia). 1919 was certainly the closest the US has ever come to a revolutionary situation (not that it was one). The developments that led to 1919 in the US and the coming to power of the first Labor government in Britain took a quarter of a century to unfold. They were the consequence of a shift in the balance of power between class organizations and of the attempt by the working class to redress that unfavorable shift.

In the US today the change in the post-WWII balance of class forces is easy to describe. Vast merger movements continue to produce ever larger units of capital, many of which are multinational and conglomerate — which diminishes any one union's ability to strike effectively or otherwise have leverage over corporate decisions. On the other side, the unions have remained stagnant and declined as a portion of the workforce in traditional industries as

well as overall. Alongside of this, the crushing of the organized Black liberation movement at the end of the '60s has allowed Blacks and other minority communities to become the province in which the pauperization of the working class has been carried out for the past decade. This has concealed, for a time, the actual effects of the crisis on the class as a whole by ghetto-izing it, and perpetuating the racial split in the class. This too has weakened the ability of the entire class to respond to the crisis and blinded many of the white, better-paid, sections to the true nature of the situation (thus, the large Reagan vote among white unionists). Along with what was said earlier, this explains the slowness with which the organized working class has responded. As we shall see later, there is now reason to believe that the blindness to the total nature of the attack on labor is changing.

This shift in the balance of forces has produced institutional changes in the two areas that have been the mainstay of the American labor stability and conservatism since WWII: the collective bargaining system and the "New Deal" coalition that underlay the strength of the Democratic Party.

1) **The collective bargaining system.** Post WWII labor relations in the US were based on a deal that granted conditional acceptance of unionism in return for the acceptance of management prerogatives in the workplace and wage and benefit increases limited by productivity growth and economic expansion. This deal provided order and predictability for the employer and an expanding living standard for union members through a system of pattern bargaining, inviolable term contracts, and the assumption that each new contract would bring economic improvements for the workers. It was a conservative and class collaborationist set-up, but one which benefitted American workers economically. This system has become too expensive from the vantage point of the employers and they are now attempting to dismantle it and replace it with one in which the union is marginalized. The shift in power relations that has already taken place has made them bolder in this effort.

The employers are attempting to replace the post-WWII system of labor relations with one that is more decentralized or fragmented at the national level and more under management control in the workplace. This involves the destruction of pattern bargaining, in as much as it implies an upward pattern. This process is already quite advanced in rubber, auto, and trucking, which are three of the most important trend setters. It is likely to become an issue in steel, construction, airlines, and elsewhere. Simultaneously, there is a well-orchestrated attempt to break or drastically weaken some unions — the United Mine Workers, building trades in certain kinds of construction, public employees, etc. Taken together, these trends, if successful, would prevent unions from raising or maintaining wage and benefit levels of millions of workers.

In the workplace, the employers are attempting to by-pass unionism, though not necessarily the union officials, by setting up fake worker participation programs — Quality of Work Life, Employee In-

volvement, job enrichment, quality circles, etc. These programs are directed at marginalizing shop floor unionism by providing alternative institutions that deal with traditional union matters. Union participation, per se, does not prevent this from happening. Taken in combination with the effects of the new technology, which gives management greater control through apparently objective technology, the threat to workplace unionism is enormous.

The early successes of some employers in these attacks is slowly spreading the burden of pauperization beyond the Black and minority working classes. While it clearly represents a threat to the working class and its organizations, it also tends to undo the rules by which both sides have played the game. Labor has not yet responded with any great changes in its methods of functioning, but there is a widespread awareness that the old ways won't work. Much of the top leadership, of course, sees a change in its own behavior by accepting pieces of the employer-sponsored attacks and adopting the rhetoric of cooperation. Workers too accept some of the pieces of the plan in the belief that this is the only way to defend their jobs. Obviously, the building of alternative methods of struggle and organization and the formation of an alternative leadership are central to our perspective.

2) **The New Deal Coalition.** The changing balance of class forces has also undermined the post-WWII political set up. The crisis of the system might well have produced a left variant of American liberalism; perhaps something along the lines of Rohatyn-style plannistic liberalism. Yet, this kind of thinking remains marginal to US politics, for now. Instead, the forces of political liberalism have moved constantly to the right. The Carter administration played out this retreat in a disorderly manner; today Congressional liberals play it out by sponsoring harassment raids on the Reagan budget. For the moment, left-liberalism has been left to America's tiny social democracy, DSOC, which has become somewhat less tiny as a consequence, but is still the poor relative of world social democracy. The collapse of traditional labor-liberalism has meant that the glue that once held the New Deal coalition together, the economic program, has evaporated, and the coalition has come apart as an effective electoral block. Within the electorate there have been some defections to the right, probably no permanent ones, but the main feature of the collapsing coalition is abstention. The collapse of the coalition and of liberalism's economic program has opened the door to the far right. Behind all of this, and explaining why no left liberal variant has emerged, is the higher degree of political organization and aggressiveness of the capitalist class itself.

Generally, most American capitalist are content to let their politicians run things. But in the past ten years, this practice has been abandoned in favor of capitalist political activism, both through lobbying organizations like the Business Roundtable and electoral vehicles such as PACs. They have outspent and outlobbied labor many times over. Furthermore, they have responded to the crisis in terms of the ideology of the American business community,

which has always been a conservative one. Their political organization and aggressiveness reflect the increased size and power of the units of capital they head. They have succeeded in carrying the liberal Democrats down the road to the right as well as capturing the Republican Party for the right. In this process, aided by the high cost of media politics, labor's traditional influence has been drastically reduced.

Political realignment is in the air. Inherent in the situation are a number of alternatives, not one inevitable outcome. Again, this situation forms an important part of our perspective for the '80s.

### 3. The Potential

The collapse of the post-WWII system of collective bargaining and of the political alignments of that period represent the crumbling of the two pillars of post-WWII class stability. The possibility that the employers will get their way is there, but so is the potential for the working class to upset those plans and impose its own solutions. Implied in this situation is the fight for a new unionism and for a labor party. Both of these represent the only likely or practical ways in which the American working class can redress the balance of forces in the near future. The ideas of militant unionism, of organizing the unorganized, and of a labor party are inherent in the conditions of the day, and are gaining popularity. The awareness of the attack on the unions as a general attack is fairly widespread today. The need for a political response is becoming clearer to most union activists.

Furthermore, the class nature of events has been given a new visibility and new urgency by the Reagan administration. Unlike any administration since the 1920s, Reagan has put forth a plan for economic recovery that is comprehensive and based visibly on a class redistribution of income from workers to capitalists. What is more, his program, also unlike previous ones, hits virtually every section of the working class. This program promises to move the pauperization of the working class beyond its racial ghetto and to make it visible and painful to all. The reason so many workers came to Washington on September 19 was because they understood this. When Reagan added union busting, in the form of his attack on PATCO, to this program he provided the interrelation of politics and what is going on in industry.

The potential for significant steps toward genuine class consciousness among American workers exists in the situation that is unfolding. But it also seems clear that the steps taken toward class independence and consciousness will remain within the limits of reformism and traditional labor ideas. That is, like the European working class, American workers are turning toward traditional organizations and traditional ideas for fighting back. This doesn't mean that new ideas won't be projected. But even the idea of a labor party is really an attempt to project unions, the traditional organizations in the US, into the political realm. The reform movements, as we observed earlier, are also ways of turning toward traditional organization, in fact, returning to the

"tradition" of militant unionism — which is typically the way reformers explain what they are doing.

In actuality, this turning to tradition represents crucial advances in the consciousness and organization of the working class at its most basic levels. It is the sort of building of the infrastructure of the class and rudimentary class consciousness without which revolutionary ideas make no sense to most people. But it is also a stage of development which, for most workers, has its own integrity, its own demands.

We have to be frank in recognizing that the sort of activity that goes on in the next few years, while it will advance consciousness and organization, is not going to be "party-building." That is, the American working class is not going to leap over the stage of rudimentary class consciousness in a couple of years, by-passing a reformist labor party and economic trade unionism in favor of revolution. Like every other working class, under conditions of the modern capitalist state, the American working class will go through a class conscious but reformist phase before it turns to revolution. In Europe, that has meant defeats for the revolutionary left, here it will be a giant step forward because it means the fight for class independence. Without this understanding of the dialectics of the situation it will be very difficult for revolutionaries in the US to hold onto a revolutionary outlook.

### 4. Revolutionaries in the struggle for class independence.

Since 1921 when Lenin intervened in the American Communist movement to end its sectarian isolation, revolutionary Marxists have advocated class struggle unionism and a labor party as the major steps to be taken by the American working class toward revolutionary consciousness. It was believed then that these developments would serve as a transition in consciousness from the conservative unionism and capitalist politics that characterized the US working class then as now. But it was also understood that the fight for these ideas itself would be a fertile ground for recruitment to socialist consciousness for at least a significant minority of the class.

For revolutionary Marxists the tasks of building the independent organizations of the class and of building a revolutionary socialist trend within those organizations have always been interrelated. These have always been the tasks the IS set for itself. When we entered industry around 1970 we did so precisely to build a socialist trend in the class. Our mistake in the mid-1970s was not that, but rather the exaggerated idea that we could build the embryo of the party, the highest form that a socialist trend can take. The conditions were not there. Now we must adopt a more modest form of socialist trend as our goal, of which more will be said later. For the moment I will return to the task of building the independent organizations of the class and the role of revolutionaries.

Revolutionary socialists have always faced a certain dilemma. Revolutionary situations are rare circumstances. In the US there has yet to be a genuine revolutionary situation. This fact alone explains



why so much of the left in the US is sectarian and why the working class has remained dependent on bourgeois reformism. Even mass revolutionary parties from the time of Marx, through Lenin, and into the 1930s have been vexed by this dilemma. Yet, there has always been a method by which the great revolutionary leaders and organizations have dealt with this dilemma.

This method begins with the understanding that the differences between revolutionary socialists and reformists of various sorts have never been over whether one fights for reforms in non-revolutionary or even reactionary periods. "Maximalism," the notion that socialists fight only for the revolutionary seizure of power, has long been discredited. Indeed, it is well established that revolutionary situations grow out of reform struggles in those circumstances when revolutionary methods are required to win reforms (such as "Peace, land and bread"). This concept, revolutionary methods to win reforms, is an old one in our political tendency. It goes back to Marx, as do most things, and was developed by Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Draper. It is an important concept because it pertains not only to the eve of revolution, but to the way in which revolutionary socialists approach politics generally.

By revolutionary methods we mean strategies and tactics that involve the maximum number of people, i.e., mass struggle rather than cajoling or permeation; that allow people to learn from struggle; and most importantly, *that advance the consciousness and independent organizations of the class*. Granted that there are rare moments when reformist leaders wish to advance one or another of these things, such as John L. Lewis' willingness to advance the state of organization of the class in 1937, though not its consciousness or political independence. In most circumstances, however, the strategies, tactics and even the particular reforms are different from those of the revolutionaries and seldom are directed at increasing consciousness or organization among the workers.

Indeed, today, in America, the strategies and tactics of reformist socialism, let alone liberalism, can be characterized as "line of least resistance" strategies. That is, they seek strategies that attempt to circumvent mass mobilization or confrontation. Harrington's concept of the "invisible mass movement" is an explicit formulation of this. It also shows up in the sort of programs devised to appear realistic. Rather than getting to the heart of the matter, they tend to be complicated and byzantine, like the CLEC and COIN programs, in the hopes they won't scare away retreating liberals on whom they depend. This sort of reformism does not advance the consciousness or organization of the working class.

Another dimension to the relationship of revolutionaries to reform struggles involves timing. While it is true that class struggle unionism and the labor party have been in the program of revolutionary Marxism for 60 years, it is not true that the revolutionaries could actually take up these fights at all times. The fight for militant unionism was not on the agenda of the 1950s, at least in the same way it has been for the last period, much less the years

ahead. And circumstances have made the fight for a labor party possible only recently. Thus, the relationship of revolutionaries to reform involves conditions as well as methods of struggle and the specific nature of the reforms.

Reform is a term that covers a multitude of good works, fine intentions, and acts both reactionary and progressive. In relation to imminent revolution or in opposition to a revolutionary perspective, reformism is reactionary. But in a period dominated by conservatism, reformism can be progressive. There is also the matter of what the object of reformism is. There is also a difference between the reformism of various classes. There are reforms from below and those from above. And so on.

The reformism we are speaking of here is working class reformism. It is reformism in that it does not challenge the fundamental basis of capitalism, but it is a reformism that is opposed to bourgeois reformism in the actual political arena. It poses solutions to the economic and social problems of the day that are different and in many cases opposed to those being advocated by traditional American liberal reformism. Whatever its particular program (the current IAM "Rebuilding America Act" is an example of a program that is reformist to the core, but goes well beyond anything put forth by New Deal liberalism), the core of active working class reformism in the 1980s and beyond is its thrust toward political class independence — the first necessary step toward becoming a class *for itself*, to use Marx's term. This historic step is the basis for all future revolutionary developments. *In its relationship to American history and politics, independent working class reformism is a giant step toward revolution, not a road block to it.* The current backwardness of American politics and of the consciousness of most American workers stems precisely from the failure of the class to take this step as the logical consequence of the CIO upheaval. In both the industrial and political arenas the institutional framework that resulted from the failure is breaking down, opening the door to such a step in the years ahead. Who, during the early stages of this process, will point the way?

That is precisely the role of revolutionaries in this period. Naturally, a labor party and most likely a revitalized labor movement as well will be led, and, in their majority, populated by people with reformist consciousness. But an historic outcome such as a new unionism, or a labor party is by no means inevitable. Different possibilities are inherent in the situation that has been unfolding. The progressive steps will be resisted at every point by the ruling class, its government, the vast majority of trade union leaders, liberal politicians, the press, etc. A progressive resolution of the changing industrial and political scenes must be fought for. John L. Lewis did not dream up the CIO until the motion for the unionization of mass production industry was well underway, until it beckoned to leaders of national prominence. Even assuming that a William Winpisinger is to play an analogous role, and I don't assume it, the sentiment and the motion must be there first.

The task of fighting for a revitalized labor movement and a labor party in the early stages of the process, which is when it counts most, fall largely to the revolutionaries. This is not to deny the importance of many people today, from a vast variety of political perspectives including reformism, who are fighting for these ideas. To quote an old labor saying, "It takes an organization to fight an organization." The forces which oppose these progressive developments we seek, either explicitly or implicitly, are organized. As we have learned again and again, every movement needs an organized backbone. More often than not in US labor history, that has come from organized revolutionary socialists — or at least people who thought of themselves that way and used their organization for these purposes, even if the organization was, in fact, degenerated.

None of this is to say that all of history rests on the shoulders of the IS. Alone we could not rally the forces needed to win the sorts of fights we can predict. But the IS can play a role in moving other left forces to take up these fights, in particular, the trade union left, but also other groups.

The notion that seems to have crept into the thinking of some ISers, that there is no particular role for revolutionaries or revolutionary organization in a period of reformism, is truly a peculiar one. We are fond of reciting the central role of various groups that thought of themselves as revolutionary socialist in building the IBT, the CIO, and in the fights for a labor party during the '20s and '30s. We understand there is something in the politics, theory and traditions of revolutionary socialism (not just our group) that allows revolutionaries to play a particularly important role in such reformist events and developments in the past, but put a question mark over what it is we are supposed to do now.

That the political outcome of the CIO upheaval was mere reformism of a bourgeois liberal sort is clear now. We can even look back and see that the balance of forces probably precluded a successful fight for a labor party. But we also know that our Trotskyist ancestors missed out on the CIO to a large extent because they were executing the "French Turn" and disqualified themselves from the fight for a labor party because they opposed it until 1938 — when Trotsky came up with a convoluted and unwieldy notion that we favored not a reformist labor party but a revolutionary one. One does not have to accept Trotsky's assessment that the crisis of the working class movement of the '30s was simply a crisis of leadership in order to understand that the lack of even one, sizable revolutionary organization to fight consistently for a labor party had something to do with the weakness of the labor movement and its eventual collapse in the '40s into the Democratic Party. The revolutionaries had a particular role to play in the reformist development that was the CIO and they failed to play it. But it is clear that the role existed and that no one else, no reformist force, played it with any consistency. The labor leaders who favored a labor party, always favored it after the next election. The CP dropped it, the SP couldn't make up its mind, etc.

The fight for the concept of class independence,

embodied in the new unionism and the labor party ideas, is a revolutionary task that requires a revolutionary, class outlook and organization. Down the road reformist forces will jump on the band wagon (it won't work if they don't) but with exceptions here and there, they will not initiate consistent fights or campaigns for these concepts. Indeed, the bulk of organized forces is opposed or indifferent to these ideas. In the realm of revitalizing the labor movement, the bulk of the reformist leadership is the enemy, as they are on the labor party question as well. Organized "socialist" reformism in the US, DSOC, cannot even take a position on union reform as an organization and opposes the labor party idea by actively organizing people to work in the Democratic Party and perpetuate the illusion that labor can express its true interests through that capitalist party. Who then, will fight for a renewed labor movement and a labor party today. Not them! Us, the revolutionaries.

In refining a perspective for the period, an analysis of trends and events, and the right kinds of program around which to fight, we need an organization. Individuals or vaguely defined "tendencies" are generically incapable of such tasks. Our understanding of this fact leads us to a regroupment perspective, since we also understand that a tiny organization will not be adequate to the job. But the possibility of growth and regroupment lies in an organized fight for revitalized unionism and a labor party, in the development of real mass struggles in the coming years, and in building the organizations of the working class at the base. These are tasks that a broad range of people can agree on and be won to, including even reformists, if we have a growing organization functioning on this perspective. Regroupment will become attractive to other groups and individuals if they are working along common lines on a shared perspective and if the motion in the class along these general lines is sufficient to give reality to the perspective. No one can guarantee that the working class will rise to the occasion, but we can be certain that if no organized voices are around to point the way to class independence, confusion and backwardness will prevail, regroupment will prove an illusion, and revolutionary possibilities will fade into the distant future.

## 5. Politics in the Reagan Era

Mainstream American politics have been drifting to the right for several years. More accurately, they have been pulled to the right by the growing conservative activism of the majority trends in the capitalist class. Rather than moving to the left, liberal reformism has also moved rightward, adopting its own versions of supply-side and austerity programs. The coming to power of the conservative right, though not the most extreme sections of it, has altered the familiar patterns of US politics of the last three decades. The pattern in which the Republican-alternate power with the Democrats, but do not substantially undo previous reforms, no longer holds. This raises the potential, though hardly the inevitability, that American politics could polarize

along programmatic and ideological lines to a far greater degree than in the past. Since the central domestic political issue is the economy, i.e., how to make US capitalism healthy at the expense of the working class, the question of class and of organized labor will be central to politics.

The fight to make programmatic realignment also a class realignment in the form of a labor party is key to the period for the left. The political situation is ripe for the development of labor party sentiment within organized labor and for related forms of independent politics among oppressed groups. While we believe such sentiment will grow, and that people will be open to such ideas, the matter of actual labor party developments — local, state, or national — depends heavily upon the ability of liberalism to reorganize and come forth with a credible alternative program. This is not just a matter of making electoral gains in 1982 or of recapturing the White House and Congress in 1984. These are likely to happen solely because of widespread disgust with the mess that Reagan creates. A genuine revival of liberalism, a rebuilding of the New Deal coalition, or some version of it, requires the sort of programmatic glue that emerged from the New Deal.

The New Deal coalition was held together by the ability of the federal government to put money in the hands of its various constituencies. Keynesianism provided the theoretic underpinning, war and the permanent war economy was the basis of prosperity that kept the money flowing. All of that is over. There is simply no possibility of financing such a electoral coalition again. This is not to say that temporary electoral majorities can't be pasted together on the basis of various promises, or that they won't be. But the economic imperative of austerity and the liberal predilection toward that as a policy (wage controls, gasoline rationing, etc.) means constant tension within any such coalition. Most importantly, it will mean tensions and political differences about austerity within the labor movement — since the labor movement is always the prime formal target of austerity.

It is important to bear in mind that a Democratic administration that is forced to implement some version of austerity by the objective situation and by its own ideological limitations (Mondale or Kennedy will not bring about sweeping nationalizations like Mitterand) will be unable to fulfill the main political promises upon which its electoral alliances are tacked together, namely various promises to restore programs or cuts made under Reagan. In all likelihood, a Democratic administration taking office in 1985 will inherit not only the drastic cuts of the Reagan years, but its budget deficits as well — along with inflation and unemployment. Any attempt to deal with all of these conflicting problems in the framework of New Deal liberalism and austerity will only produce still more economic shambles. Labor may cooperate with such efforts, but it will not benefit from them and its ability to cooperate will diminish.

It is not only labor as such that will have good reason to look for more drastic political alternatives in the coming years. Even before Reagan took office

the condition of the Black community had reached crisis proportions. Permanent youth unemployment is the highest it has ever been and is growing. Black workers who finally secured decent jobs, as in auto or public employment, have been hit by the crisis and its effects. The Reagan cuts and the attack on affirmative action will exacerbate this. As the second most important element in the old New Deal coalition and in any gerry-built clone of that coalition in 1984, the Black community will have big demands to make on the Democrats — urgent, expensive demands. At this point it is impossible to predict just what directions Black politics will take in the coming years, but it is clear that the tensions between the Black community, even its most conservative leaders, and an Democratic administration will be great.

Under these circumstances the revolutionary left has the opportunity to project a clear strategy for fighting Reaganism and the right as well as for dealing with the Democrat's failure to deliver on their promises after 1984. We put forth a *coalition politics of confrontation*, with labor at the center of the coalition providing much of the organization and troops needed to fight the right. This coalition is not just another letterhead operation, but a mass coalition at all levels with a program of opposition to Reagan's plans and the rudiments of an alternative. The growth of Black, Latin, and female membership in the labor movement — both absolutely and as a proportion — puts labor in a better position to lead such a coalition than in the past. In the view of revolutionaries such a coalition politics of confrontation points to a class realignment, a labor party. But we also point to the revitalization of the unions, their democratization and the involvement of the ranks in the decisions of both industrial and political matters and to organizing the unorganized. To be politically effective, labor and its allies will need to draw on the latent power of workers in poorly organized regions and occupations, new and old. (The element of the New Deal coalition that gave it its majority status was the "solid south." That is gone, which is why the Democrats lose national elections now and again. Both this fact, along with reapportionment, make it imperative to organize the unorganized, particularly in the south and west.)

## 6. A Strategy for the Decade

The revolutionary left can project a distinctive overall strategy for the working class in the '80s. This strategy is composed of four central ideas. All of these ideas point towards increasing both the level of organization at the base of the working class and the class consciousness of workers who are involved in fighting for or carrying out this strategy. The emphasis is not on programmatic, platform type ideas, as important as those are, but on action and organization, because it is these areas that most inhibit the resistance of the working class today. The four ideas are:

1) **Revitalize the labor movement.** The carrier of this idea is largely the rank and file reform movements, but also some progressive officials who



tend to be in smaller unions with relatively stronger democratic traditions. The reform movements are, or should become, the bearers of a concept of a new unionism that is the alternative to the plans the employers are now trying to implement. These concepts flow from basic traditional trade union notions such as solidarity, democracy, militancy, and equality. As an overall alternative program it would deal with collective bargaining strategies designed to counter corporate power; workplace organization and democracy; the equality of national minorities and women; the restructuring of the unions to meet the needs of the day.

2) **Organize the unorganized.** A shift in power back toward labor cannot be affected without organizing millions of workers in clerical, service, high tech, and other growing job markets. In spite of general economic crisis a number of important new and old industries continue to grow. The economic basis for organizing these industries is there. A labor movement that is visible in the streets will be more attractive than it has been in the past. Furthermore, as reformers gain more positions, even locally, they can play a role in enlisting new workers, setting up and supporting organizing drives. A wave of unionization in the Sun Belt will transform American politics.

3) **The politics of confrontation.** The grossly class nature of the Reagan plan brought forth a wave of anger and resentment even before it was put into effect. As the actual effects of this program are felt by the various sections of the working class, that anger will rise. Already in 1981 we have seen several large demonstrations by labor. We can both expect and push for more around a variety of issues. Nothing transforms consciousness and creates the desire for more and better organization than mass action.

4) **The labor party.** The rank and file movements, the movements of the oppressed, and the labor movement itself need a political strategy. The current strategy of the majority of the labor bureaucracy is to reorganize the Democratic Party along traditional lines, with themselves as a major power broker and a New Deal style program. None of this will overcome the mass defection of working class voters from politics or the ability of the ruling class to finance and influence the politicians of this party. A fundamental class realignment is needed to break out of the rightward thrust of American politics. The fight for a labor party in the labor movement will help to form a genuine class understanding of politics for many American workers, a giant step toward revolutionary class consciousness.

Together these ideas provide a strategy by which labor can fight to redress the balance of forces. It is also a program, a political program, around which the rank and file and reform forces can fight and provide a credible alternative to the failing, reactionary strategies being put forth by most labor bureaucrats. From the vantage point of revolutionary socialists, it provides a set of ideas that are believable to many union, minority, and women activists and which can help to organize unified activity and a common outlook for the years ahead —

regardless of various differences in tradition, theory, or international questions. Furthermore, now, in the early phases of the processes described earlier, there is no self-conscious force capable of presenting and fighting for these ideas in a consistent, political manner other than the revolutionary left. Others, of course, share some or most of these ideas in one or another form. But within the unions, which is where this program must be discussed and fought for if it will have any meaning, it is basically the forces we have called the "trade union left," the core of which are people who still view themselves as revolutionary socialists, that is capable of unifying itself around such a program and carrying it to broader forces in the unions.

## 7. War and Social Oppression

Obviously there is more to the Reagan response to the evolving crisis of capitalism than its economic or labor policy. It is evident that to a greater extent than any previous administration since the Vietnam war, Reagan and his advisers are contemplating war — land and possibly even limited nuclear war. The most likely candidates for land war are Central America and the Middle East. As this document deals with American political perspectives, I will not attempt to describe or analyze the international forces at work. What is most important for socialists in the US is that the anti-war mobilizations that began this year are only the opening shot. It is heartening to see that there is still mass anti-war anti-militarist sentiment in the US. All the attempts to undo the "Vietnam syndrome" have been at best partly successful. There does appear to be a wave of national chauvinism, boosted by Carter's manipulation of the hostage affair and enthusiastically encouraged by Reagan. Yet, there are broader forces today opposed to an interventionist foreign policy than there were in the early years of the Vietnam war. Some union leaderships and a number of large churches bring new strength to the earliest stages of opposition. Along with the tenacity of the revolutionaries in Central America and the Palestinians in the Middle East, the growing opposition in Europe to American adventurism and nuclear posture represent another important ally and a restraining force on the Reagan administration. It is crucial, however, that the anti-war forces in the US keep up the pressure.

The Reagan administration has increased the intensity of social oppression of national minorities and women. This is true not only in terms of the obvious economic and social policies, but in the legitimization of white- and male-supremacist ideology that is aiding the forces of the extreme right — Klan, Nazis, etc. The actual effects of the Reagan policies or of far right political gains at the state and local levels are only beginning to be felt. As they become more severe there will certainly be a reaction. Just what forms resistance will take is hard to say. One form will be increased demands on the Democratic Party by the more organized and visible leadership elements in the national minority communities and the women's movement. This will in-

crease the strains on the fragile coalition that supports the Democrats, as we mentioned earlier. In the last couple of years we have seen large demonstrations of women for the ERA and Blacks for Martin Luther King Day. This indicates the likelihood of mass action around some of Reagan's more painful cuts as they are implemented. The state of the left within the Black community and the women's movement appears to be weak, however.

The Black community seems to be at the lowest level of internal, independent organization in years. The liberation and revolutionary movements of the '60s and early '70s have been destroyed by government repression or faded and fractured. Much of the "community organizing" infrastructure inherited from the War on Poverty era has been or is being dismantled. Even the traditional organizations of the Black community, notably the NAACP, are said to be declining in membership. All of this is true in spite of the general feeling in the Black community that a genocidal situation exists — not in the sense of the rapid mass murder of all Blacks, but in the sense of policies and forces directed at limiting the size of the Black population and of reducing what remains to sub-human standards.

One response to this situation is the rise of nationalism, largely cultural and directed at enhancing national consciousness to enable a long-term resistance to genocide. This nationalism, however, has not yet produced any sizable organizations. Also concerned with genocide, but with a more political and activist orientation, are the new organizations within the Black community, the National Black United Front (NBUF) and National Black Independent Political Party (NBIPP). These are hopeful signs, but as yet, neither of these new organizations has achieved mass proportions. NBUF does have some real strength in New York. Both NBUF and NBIPP are coalition-type organizations. They are not nationalist or ideological. They contain nationalists, leftists, preachers, and liberals. From the viewpoint of revolutionary socialists these coalition organizations represent, right now, the best hope for resistance in the Black community. Revolutionaries, Black and white, should do all in their power to foster these organizations and contribute to their growth and political combativity.

The women's movement has been revitalized by the double-whammy attack of the Reagan administration and the right-wing, and in that sense, the attack has had a positive impact. There's the feeling 'If they can do it, we can do it too.' For example, as the ERA goes down to the wire, NOW has organized a "missionary" campaign that has captured the imagination of many feminists, including some new to the movement, who have volunteered to take a year off and work for the ERA. Likewise, the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) is reorganizing itself to meet the right's attack on abortion.

But the women's movement is dominated by organizations committed to functioning mainly within the framework of liberal electoral campaigns and lobbying. This strategy is bound to lose, and the experience will be demoralizing to those who attempt to carry it out. Feminists look to the successes

of the right, and attempt to implement a mirror-image strategy. If the right is winning because it has targeted state legislative campaigns, then feminists should get pro-choice candidates elected instead. This seems like the most expedient route, but it will not work. The right is not winning only because it has an effective machine. Its politics are the politics in power today. Feminists cannot expect their politics to be implemented through the same tactics.

There really is no successful strategy short of rebuilding the women's movement. The success of the 1978 ERA march on Washington (the first of series of mass demonstrations by social movements), the fact that the ERA missionary campaign has attracted recruits, the increasing concern and call to arms around abortion, including the growth of R2N2, show that there is the potential to rebuild the women's movement. This time, the movement must be broadened and deepened by seeking new constituencies in the working class. Some of the newer issues of the women's movement point a way forward. Despite the setbacks of this period, women have made substantial advances in the areas of sexual harassment, comparable worth, and organizing office workers. These issues also speak to a contradiction in right-wing politics: women are supposed to assume more traditional roles, and yet it is clearer than ever before that women have to work. There seems to be some energy for fighting around workplace issues that address this contradiction and help to improve women's worklives.

There is no common program, strategy, or set of priorities around which the feminist left could become a pole within the broader women's movement. This is an important task for revolutionary feminists, from various organizations or as individuals, if the broader movement is to break out of its dependence on liberal diplomacy. The IS, with others, should begin this discussion. The development of a politics of confrontation as they relate to women's issues is important both in terms of the defense of the gains women made during the '70s, and of the longer term prospects for class realignment.

Most of the struggles of the oppressed for the next few years are likely to be defensive in character, as are those waged by labor. It is, of course, important for socialists to take political responsibility for even the most minimal defensive battle. But it is not enough. Once again, to the revolutionaries falls the task of developing a long-range strategy that goes beyond defense; toward liberation. For us the development of such a strategy begins with the central role of the working class and in particular its organized and organizing (hopefully) sections. We favor independent organization of the oppressed because ultimately we understand that any people achieve liberation through their own efforts and struggles. But we also understand that in the US they do so in a context in which the independent struggles of the oppressed are intertwined with the struggle for class emancipation.

Today, when we are clearly far away from liberation of the oppressed or emancipation of the class, the

form of this context has two sides. First is the role of working class people in the liberation struggles. Most of the existing Black or women's organizations are dominated by middle class or declassé elements. But within the unions exist a growing pool of talent and organization that can play an important role in developing the movements of the oppressed and provide a working class base. On the other side of the question is the fact that movements of the oppressed have generally recognized the need for allies. The progressive forces inside of organized labor represent the most potentially powerful of such allies. These two sides of the context actually come together in the notion of coalition politics.

The concept of an active, mass coalition of forces engaged in various levels of action — electoral, direct, pressure, etc. is one that offers hope to the various forces, today largely isolated, who feel incapable of resisting the massive power they see arrayed against them. The key to such a coalition is the organized working class, because it embodies the oppressed in its ranks and because it has the organizational and social power to alter the political balance of forces, and therefore the political atmosphere, to a degree that neither the national minority nor women's movement do on their own. While the achievement of such a coalition is in reality a long-term fight in itself, that vision can, and has in the past, activated the forces that make it a reality.

As currently practiced by labor bureaucrats and leaders of the reformist Black, Latin, and women's organizations, coalition politics is generally confined to lobbying or electoral activity. One task of socialists is to fight for bolder, mass-oriented type of coalition politics. But moving the unions as a whole is a long-term task also. Revolutionaries should not only put forth the idea of labor-centered coalition on a mass scale, but wherever possible try to put this concept into practice at the rank and file level, even if on a small scale. Naturally, it also falls to the left to wage the fight within the unions to make them fit for a genuine mass coalition based on a recognition of the demands and needs of the oppressed — and that is no small task.

Whether it is a question of opposing war moves, or of defending the oppressed, most of the struggles we face in the next few years will be defensive in nature. The revolutionaries propose a labor-centered, mass-based coalition as the way to turn defensive struggles into a politics of confrontation and a basic change in the balance of political forces. We see alongside this process, and key to it, the struggle to revitalize the unions and make them instruments of rank and file struggle and the organization of the unorganized. Together these forces could bring about a fundamental class realignment in US politics — a change with implications for revolutionary developments in the future both here and abroad. But we know that these are possibilities, not inevitabilities. They are ideas and actions that must be fought for and organized for. The forces of inertia, fear, and conservatism are immense. And while these tasks and possibilities fall within the framework of reformism in and of themselves, there are no reformist forces organized to fight for them as a whole. At this early stage of an unfolding process that task falls first and foremost to those people who can best understand the underlying forces that make

these ideas possibilities, and for the most part, those people are revolutionary socialists.

## 8. The State of the Left in the US

The state of the revolutionary left in the US is, if anything, more appalling than that of Europe. For one thing it remains proportionately smaller than that of almost any European country. For another it would appear to be in decline, both organizationally and numerically. Perhaps more crucial, in relationship to American politics and world events, it is utterly confused. On the other hand, organized social democracy, DSOC, is growing and expressing a self-confidence and aggressiveness it has not shown in this country for a long time. It would be tempting to look at this situation and to imagine it to be a clone of what is occurring in Europe. But the fact is, that while the failure of the revolutionary left is related to the international phenomenon discussed early in this document, the growth of social democracy in the US represents something different.

In Europe the growth of left reformism which is breathing new life into many of the SPs is a result of the defensive response of some sections of the working class. Clearly DSOC is no such thing. Rather it is a reflection of the ideas now popular in Europe and in the American middle-class intelligentsia. These ideas are gaining prominence among a small section of the liberal middle class. DSOC is, to a tiny degree, filling the political vacuum created on the left of the Democratic Party by the collapse of New Deal liberalism. Its long-sought respectability in that milieu is paying off. At the same time, as a reflection of European left reformism and the Socialist Internationals new turn toward the third world liberation movements, and by virtue of its relatively greater size, it is also attractive to many who see no hope for the revolutionary left. DSOC not only is not the same phenomenon as European left reformism, but could not be since it is not a traditional channel of working class resistance or defense. This is not to say that DSOC won't have an impact on the rest of the left; it already has. Nor need we deny that some working class activists may be attracted to it by virtue of its size or its established relationship with the Democratic Party. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the growth of DSOC is primarily the result of the collapse of "official" labor/liberalism on the left of the Democratic Party.

The disarray of the revolutionary left is largely a consequence of the failure of "party building," which stems from the conservative response of the working class to the crisis and its historically low level of consciousness and organization at the base. In brief, neither in the US nor in any other advanced capitalist nation did a revolutionary perspective or even the building of a mass revolutionary organization seem realistic by the end of the '70s. The failures in Portugal and Spain tended to underline this. Hence, not only groups that actually oriented toward the industrial working class, such as ourselves and the Maoists, but also NAM realized that their plans for mass socialist organization to the left of social democracy had failed. The explosive collapse of organized Maoism was additionally aided by events in China and the relationship of China to western imperialism.



There is, however, another, progressive side to the collapse of organized Maoism and the disarray of the revolutionary left. The various party-building perspectives and, in most cases, the types of organizations required to implement the high degree of voluntarism required by those perspectives, were, in reality, barriers to the creation of a revolutionary socialist current in the working class. Workers simply could not be permanently recruited to the level of activity and discipline (things that are generally not part of cultures of any section of the American working class) when the events and successes did not appear to warrant them. On the other hand, it was our experience that workers could be won to revolutionary socialist ideas and keep those ideas. While this was a small number of workers, it nevertheless points to a different organization and political orientation than was the practice of the party building groups.

Additionally, while Maoism in Europe and America definitely represented a healthy break to the left from the Stalinism of the CPs (while Eurocommunism was a break to the right), its ideology was not genuinely Marxist or working class. The idealism inherent in orthodox Maoism was at the root of the wild swings between adventurism and opportunism. It also explains why small groups with only the thinnest roots in the working class could declare themselves *the party* by virtue of their ideology; i.e., Marxism-Leninism, Mao Tse Tung thought is working class ideology, hence the party that possesses it is working class. Not all groups within the "Marxist-Leninist party-building movement" held these ideas to the same degree, nor were all individuals as removed from or unfamiliar with genuine Marxism. Nevertheless, the hold of "orthodox Maoism" over much of the revolutionary left was ultimately a barrier to the development of a revolutionary current in the working class.

The collapse and disarray that characterizes all of the non-sectarian revolutionary left is a necessary phase through which it must go in order to make both regroupment realistic and the development of a common perspective on US politics a possibility. The breaking down of sectarian ideas and organizations, the discarding of incorrect perspectives and organizational norms for the period, is a progressive step without which further progress would be impossible. An activist regroupment orientation only becomes possible in such periods of ideological flux and change. The first step in this process is the development of a common program for action that can be carried out by a broad range of leftists, who differ on many other questions but agree on what needs to be done in the next few years. The perspective of the IS is precisely to aid that process.

Central to everything in our perspective is the belief that the strategic, organizational and political ideas presented earlier must be fought for and carried out within the working class. We are not interested in a situation where declassé radicals simply talk to each other. We wish to move broader forces so that these ideas can be put into practice and have an effect on American politics that will open up revolutionary possibilities in the future.

Since we, the IS are a small group, we have no illusions that we could carry out many of the tasks proposed here alone. The first step for us, then is to move and influence broader forces that already share many of these ideas. For the most part these people consider themselves revolutionary socialists, many of them with years of experience in the working class, or in situations close to the working class. These people make up a good proportion of what we generally call the trade union left. Like ourselves they are committed to building the rank and file reform movements in the unions. But also like ourselves, they want a political context into which to put that work. Naturally, this milieu overlaps with others, including militant workers who do not consider themselves socialists, radicals from various class backgrounds whose politics is not all that defined, and even members of DSOC who, unlike their organization, have a commitment to the rank and file movement, and even to independent political action. By speaking of the revolutionary socialists in the unions we are not seeking to exclude anyone from joint work around a common program. Rather we are trying to give a political characterization to that group, drawn heavily but not exclusively from the Maoist left, which appears to be the core of those forces most likely to be moved around the perspective outlined above and who can, right now, contribute the most from their experience to the development and fleshing out of this perspective.

What we, in fact, want to share with these leftists is a joint perspective that can move much broader forces (rank and file reformers, progressive officials, shop floor militants, etc.) in the political direction we are proposing. But in that process we have to give priority to mobilizing those most likely to move now, and that tends to be those leftists most concerned with working class activities, both the revolutionary core of the trade union left and the left outside the unions who can contribute to the development of the sort of independent politics described earlier.

We believe the IS is in a good position to play an initiating role in this process for a number of reasons. While we have had to junk our old perspective and the particular organizational norms that flowed from it, our basic politics both internationally and in terms of our understanding of the working class have remained intact. We have been able to maintain ourselves as a tendency organization. We have maintained much of our trade union work, except where jobs have disappeared. Most importantly, there is a continuity and length of experience to our trade union work that has allowed us to keep our bearings even when we had no clear perspective for revolutionary functioning. We abandoned our party building perspective in 1978 without the sort of crisis other groups went through. As a group with national contacts in the unions we have been able to keep a grasp on what is happening.

In terms of influencing the left, particularly the trade union left, a number of ISers have come into contact with a broad range of labor radicals and activists through their work with *Labor Notes*. The

April, 1981 "Rebuilding the Labor Movement" Conference sponsored by *Labor Notes* reflected this diversity, including union activists not associated with left politics. But it also reflected a high degree of agreement and enthusiasm about many of the ideas brought together in this perspective. Thus, *Labor Notes* is becoming a vehicle for popularizing and organizing for a common perspective.

The "Rebuilding the Labor Movement" Conference did not really present a perspective, although many of these ideas were discussed there. But we believe that now the trade union left can use *Labor Notes* as a means to bring activists together to discuss these ideas and eventually to organize activities that flow from them. We have seen that while people are reticent to go to meetings put on by political groups, particularly "other" groups, they will get together under the *Labor Notes* umbrella. Conferences (regional and national) and occasional local meetings sponsored by *Labor Notes* are a good way to bring the relevant people together for discussion and eventually to plan for action as well.

## 9. Changes

Our own publication, *Changes*, during its three years of publication, has helped to develop a restatement of some basic IS positions, testing their application to contemporary reality, and in some cases (the economic crisis, rank and file movements, recently Poland) serving as a vehicle for modest advances in our theory.

At the very least, *Changes* has enabled us to publish more and better articles of theory and analysis, of reasonable quality, than we had during (probably) the previous ten years. The magazine has been good enough to attract a small number of writers outside the IS, not big names, but very qualified in their particular fields.

These successes are extremely modest. And everyone who works for the magazine feels the intense frustrations of trying to put out a relevant political magazine to a small, elusive audience in this period. Our immediate concern here, however, is not with the quality of *Changes* as a publication in itself — much as that could be improved — but with its potentialities as an educational and organizing tool.

**Education.** Both for our own members and for study groups, etc., in which we might be active, *Changes* has by now amassed a substantial body of articles which are very good for beginner-to-intermediate levels of socialist education. This does not just mean whatever issue of the magazine happens to be current; there are still articles from our first year of publication which are quite useful.

Among topics for which *Changes* provides excellent material are: the urban crisis (Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland), the nature of the capitalist economic crisis, Stalinism and Eastern Europe, Central America, social democracy (though this stock of material is due for a lot of updating), women's liberation, gay and lesbian liberation, the national question, Trotskyism, independent political action. In other words, there's a lot! There are also obvious

and glaring gaps: we have had only one substantial analytic article dealing with Black liberation (the Oct. 1980 issue on women's liberation and Black women), and nothing at all on Hispanic struggles in the US.

Our feeling is that the potential for creative use of *Changes* in stimulating education and discussion in and around the IS has barely been tapped. In Detroit some members have raised the idea of a monthly discussion group around selected articles.

**Organizing.** *Changes*, if correctly and aggressively used, opens up certain possibilities for reaching and influencing a fairly diverse spectrum of forces who are important both for regroupment and for some of the basic elements of the perspectives for the left as outlined in this document.

This spectrum includes: a) activists from the trade union left in the process of breaking from Maoism, Stalinism and sectarian abstractionism, to whom revolutionary-democratic Marxism and the IS's ability to make concrete analyses of concrete phenomena can be attractive, b) some of the newer radicals and perhaps even some more experienced drawn toward DSOC because that organization has the appearance of having a viable left wing; c) people in Solidarity: Socialist-Feminist Network who are friendly toward us but with whom we will have to conduct very intensive discussions if there is to be any hope of drawing long-term common conclusions; d) independent movement activists in solidarity struggles, reproductive rights, or other movements; e) Black revolutionary intellectuals (the importance of this has been discussed in Kim's Bulletin article and will not be repeated here).

There are some problems associated with these potential audiences that have to be thought through. The topics of interest to some aren't of much concern to others. Their assumptions are very diverse. While all in one way have some point of contact with our politics, there is little in the way of common political work or understanding among themselves. Nonetheless, a common language and ways of bridging these ideological gaps must be found. Part of the answer lies in maintaining a certain style which people find attractive about the IS: that is, a willingness to argue concretely, a hard set of politics and the ability to defend them, but without pretending that we have all the answers to everything or that answers to difficult political problems can be reduced to formulas reproduced from first principles.

## 10. The Rank and File Movement and the Left

The rank and file reform movements in various unions are central to this entire perspective, for they are the first attempts to increase the level of consciousness and organization at the base. The various networks that compose these movements are themselves an example of such organization, albeit a fragile one. Their goals of democratic unionism and strong workplace organization would represent a big leap in fitting the American working class for bigger struggles ahead. But even the advance

these reform networks to the level of democratic organization, such as TDU, makes a difference in the combativity of any group of workers.

The activists in these movements represent an important part of a new generation of labor leaders. They are the potential carriers of a new unionism and independent labor politics. Though a minority in most cases, the trade union left plays an important role within this milieu of activists. In the past, through sectarianism, or party-building hype, much of the left has minimized its effectiveness in helping to build viable movements. To be sure various left groups have produced flashy events or led semi-successful campaigns, but often little was left behind. There are, of course many exceptions to this, and I believe the functioning of the IS even during our party building phase was one of them. Nevertheless, much of the revolutionary left (the reformist left simply had nothing to do with it) did not operate on the assumption that they had a responsibility to constructively build these rank and file movements, to play a part in advancing the level of organization. A great many such leftists, however, seem to have drawn the right lesson from their experience. There is today a sense among socialists functioning in the unions and in rank and file movements that they do have a responsibility to build these movements and not simply treat them as the target of the line of the day. With this understanding, the trade union left can play a key role in developing the politics of this new generation of labor leaders of which they are, themselves, a part.

While the activists of the rank and file movements are one of the major elements in carrying out the general perspective in the coming years, it is important to understand that the organizations of this movement have their own particular purposes and their integrity. They should not be the place in which contending leftists vie to pass all their favorite resolutions. The ability of a rank and file movement to attract the sympathy of the majority is essential to its success in terms of direct action or elections. If it is viewed as a political faction in the union it will lose that ability, at least under today's conditions and facing today's consciousness. We don't wish to destroy rank and file organizations by burdening them with political positions many of their own members cannot yet accept. In terms of fighting for more advanced demands, such as the labor party, other ad hoc forms should be found to involve those activists who are ready to be convinced or other people, such as progressive officials, who don't identify with the reform organization, but agree on the bigger political questions.

We are then proposing two tasks for the left in relationship to the rank and file reform movements. The first — building rank and file organizations and movements — is on a day-to-day level still the most actionable. Radicals can play an important role in this process precisely because their political education gives them the skills that are needed to help build durable organizations and to train others to do so.

The second is the political education and activation of those rank and file activists, but not

necessarily the organizations, and other politically inclined unionists in the fight for confrontation politics and the labor party. For the latter task, informal or ad hoc formations are appropriate at the moment.

## 11. Regroupment and a Socialist Trend in the Working Class.

The IS entered industry in 1970 for the purpose of building a socialist trend in the working class. This task was derailed by the failure of our party-building perspective and by the grim possibilities of direct working class recruitment. Yet, it is this task that is the object of all our rank and file work and of the fight for a labor party, in that these struggles provide the context in which socialist ideas take on some reality. We have always understood that winning workers to socialism involved more than propaganda and education. The willingness of workers to respond to socialist ideas depends on their perception of participation in class struggle. But obviously if the socialists take no active steps toward winning people to their ideas no progress will be made toward building a socialist trend in the class. For the IS this has been the situation for quite a while, and it must be reversed.

Direct recruitment to the IS is not and cannot be a strategy for building a socialist trend in the working class — any more than it was a successful strategy for party building. The difficulties of recruiting and holding workers to a small group are well known. Naturally, we should recruit workers who are willing to associate with a small socialist group and who share with us the goal of building a socialist trend. Indeed, to the degree that we can project a strategy for building such a trend within the class our ability to recruit will probably grow as time passes. In its broadest outlines the strategy for building a socialist trend in the working class lies in two developments: regroupment and the emergence of a mass movement for a labor party.

The notion of regroupment we project is not simply one of "splits and fusions" among existing groups. Most existing groups that style themselves revolutionary are hopelessly sectarian. The small number of groups that do exist and are non-sectarian and serious are, like the IS, small. We favor pursuing political discussions about regroupment and socialist strategy with groups such as the Solidarity Socialist-Feminist Network, Revolutionary Workers Headquarters, or others who express interest. Should these talks yield sufficient agreement on perspectives, tasks and socialist principles, we favor merger. But merger among small groups should be seen as a step in the larger regroupment process. The resulting group would still be small and would have only tenuous roots in the working class.

The regroupment we seek is one that regroups the thousands of socialists in the labor movement and of workers who are drawing radical conclusions from their experience in class struggle. Naturally, this is not something that will happen at once. It is rather a process in which many of the "actual existing" socialists in and around the labor movement again



see both the need and the possibility of socialist organization. This will require a series of initiatives, some by us, some by others, that put the question of socialist organization back on the agenda, for us and for others.

The IS Summer Conference of 1981 was one such initiative, but it failed to lay out a clear direction for the many non-ISers who attended.

The question of Poland offers another set of possibilities. For example, a recent meeting in Detroit on Poland was jointly sponsored by members of several different groups, and projected not only the events in Poland but our conception of socialism. The aggressive use of the Polish experience can help to frame a discussion of socialism in the American left around which we can help to frame a common conception of socialism. This may be of particular relevance in the collapsing Maoist milieu where Polish Solidarity is popular and where previously held views of the meaning of socialism are in flux. Poland is also popular among trade union activists and is a handle for moving workers toward socialist ideas.

In the next couple of years we should begin to project a series of local discussion groups or forums in which socialists, particularly those active in the unions, can begin to discuss socialist questions. We should also project the idea of a national conference on socialism in America. The potential popularity of what for many would be a new conception of revolutionary democratic socialism will gain relevance from events in Europe — east and west. Not only is Stalinism on trial in Poland, but left social democracy is also on trial in western Europe. The elan now apparent in American left social democracy is based heavily on the notion that its version of socialism is a genuine democratic alternative to both Stalinism and the anti-labor austerity programs of right social democracy and European capitalist parties. The bursting of this illusion in years to come will bolster the credibility of a revolutionary Marxist critique of left reformism.

While the regroupment process will draw on non-working class socialists, perhaps disillusioned DSOCers moving left, the heart of regroupment must lie among active workers if we are actually to build a socialist trend *in the working class*. Thus, this process is tied up with our trade union left in terms of rebuilding the unions and fighting for a labor party. The conceptions of class independence and of increased organization, combativity and class consciousness are the bridge to our socialist ideas, the context in which the ideas of working class power make sense. Together with explicitly socialist events and initiatives, our perspectives for the trade union left, the rank and file movements, and labor as a whole form the beginning of a perspective for building a socialist trend in the working class.

In the longer run, the building of a socialist trend in the working class, and perhaps even the development of a revolutionary party, will be advanced to the degree that the fight for a labor party takes on a mass character. The fight for class political independence will raise scores of questions about program, the nature of the crisis, the nature of

democracy under capitalism, etc. The persistence of crisis, the likely failure of left reformism in Europe and the resistance of capital to even the simplest of demands, will raise questions of the limits of reform long before a labor party actually takes shape. Under these circumstances the probability of the development of a genuinely socialist trend among those fighting for class independence is great — if prior steps toward regroupment have born fruit and the revolutionary wing of socialism is significant enough to have credibility. It is almost certain that a revolutionary socialist wing of the labor party movement would be a small minority, but it could be the trend that makes the development of a revolutionary party, perhaps as a split from an existing labor party, possible in the US.

## 12. The I.S.

The IS must grow. Although this is not a strategy for building a socialist trend in the working class, it is a necessary condition for us to carry out most of tasks described throughout this discussion paper. Although the last few years have been difficult for us and have left us weak, my view from the center is that we have, at last, turned a corner. We have stopped shrinking and started recruiting, slowly. We have played a central role in the success of *Labor Notes* and we are widely respected for that. We have expanded our work into some areas that are new for us — CISPES, Poland, Barbaro campaign, Citizens Party. We have established healthy relations with a variety of political tendencies, ending our self-imposed isolation. We have become a force of attraction to others. Now we must build on these gains.

This paper proposes some external tasks for the IS in the next few years. These are:

- 1) Playing a central role in developing a self-conscious trade union left, capable of acting along common programmatic and action lines. In particular, we see ourselves as promoting the fight for militant, democratic unionism along the sort of general programmatic lines described earlier and as advancing the fight for a labor party. Much of this activity will be carried out through channels other than the IS itself. But it is nonetheless a task that we are taking responsibility for along with our broader work in the rank and file movements or the labor movement in general.

- 2) Regroupment. We see this not as simply a matter of organizational mergers, but as regrouping the hundreds, possibly thousands, of socialists who have been through the experiences of the '70s and of attracting potentially larger numbers of new political activists to a process of revolutionary socialist unification. We propose taking responsibility for steps and events that can lead in that direction, such as conferences, joint publications, etc. While our emphasis is on those elements in the labor movement because we see this as part of the broader task of building a socialist trend in the working class, we also seek to involve intellectuals, students, and other non-working class elements in the process.

- 3) The building of mass social and political

movements of the oppressed and movements of protest against war. While we are too small to initiate such movements, we can play a role in winning labor support and in winning movement activists to the idea of confrontation politics and independent political action. One specific thing we should do in the coming year is work on the proposed tour by EP Thompson, leader of the British disarmament movement.

But we also have tasks that are specific to building the IS as a political tendency. Our organization has become internally weak and has remained unnecessarily small. While there have been some improvements recently, there are other things we must do in the coming months. Among these are:

1) Recruitment. In the immediate future we have two groups of people from which to recruit. These are the trade union left and the new political activists. In the short run we will probably have more luck among newer activists. The trade union leftists present a variety of difficulties, but are crucial to the development of a socialist trend in the working class. At this point, recruitment in that milieu is largely a matter of one-to-one discussions and of attempting to get those we move towards us to aid in recruiting others. In most cases this may develop into a rather long process before anyone joins, but one that is directed at bringing in a small group. Also, travelling will be required since many of these people do not live in cities where we currently have branches. To recruit among new political activists and students, the PC is proposing the publication of an introduction to the IS, which is currently in draft form, and the reprinting of Draper's *Two Souls of Socialism*. We would also suggest that branches use Draper's *Karl Marx's Theory of Social Revolution* with contacts (the first couple hundred pages of Vol. II provide a lucid introduction to our brand of Marxism and to the theoretical context in which we approach the trade union question). Study groups are a useful way to use these and other materials of a socialist educational character for new people.

2) Education of new members and those who never received a good socialist education because of the past sloppiness of the organization. The recent new members conference in Detroit was a successful example of one type of thing that could be reproduced locally, with help from the center.

3) Relations with the Black left. This has already been discussed in an article in the 12/81 IS Bulletin. Suffice it to say here that while Black recruitment will be difficult, it is obvious that without a strong

effort to make contact with Black radicals, it will be impossible. Some initial steps towards this are proposed in the Bulletin article. An effort is underway to make *Changes* more useful in this regard.

4) Strengthening the branches. While some branches have gotten active again as the IS, some barely function, as a result of which members drop away from contact with the IS even when they maintain our politics. There are certainly events enough in the world today to require discussion among socialists: Poland, the new anti-war movement in Europe, and the steps being taken towards a national reform newsletter in steel are among the things that deserve consideration and in some cases, action, by the branches. To aid in rebuilding branches and recruiting from the trade union left the organization should seek to hire a traveller, or a series of travellers, to work with the branches, aid in recruitment, etc.

5) New Branches. The organization should target plausible areas for the development of new branches in the coming years. The Bay Area, Chicago and Washington DC all have small cores of ISers and small peripheries. The Center will help these cores to expand and establish small branches.

6) Strengthening the leadership. The current PC is too small and composed of people who are involved in numerous other activities. It simply cannot carry the work load required to carry out the various ideas that get proposed, including many in this paper. The PC should be expanded by at least two members through cooptation and branch ratification. We cannot wait until the next convention.

7) IS Convention. The organization should hold a convention in the Spring of 1982 to pass a perspective (not this document, but hopefully one that draws from these ideas); to pass a new simple constitution reflecting the reality of the IS; to bring our periphery closer and aid recruitment, to solidify relations with some of the groups we work or have discussions with.

The political tasks facing revolutionary socialists in the '80s are great and pressing. The IS has a unique and important role to play in these tasks by virtue of our particular politics, our experience, and our longtime understanding of the need to base the building of a revolutionary party in the working class and its struggles. We owe it to the revolution, the working class, and ourselves to make our organization fit to carry out these tasks.