

GET ACQUAINTED SESSIONS

Excerpts, notes from, and additions to:

Political Lesson One: Get Acquainted, by James Forman

(a pamphlet published in 1971 by the Black Workers Congress)

10/15/76

WSG

Introduction and Background

The first thing we want to do in this new Workers Study Group (WSG) is to get to know each other a little by doing Get Acquainted sessions. We first read about this method in a pamphlet from the Black Workers Congress (BWC) - an organization that came out of organizing black auto workers in Detroit and lasted from 1971 to 1974. We used the Get Acquainted sessions inside the LA Work Group (LAWG) with both success and failure. This is the first time we have used it inside a Workers Study Group, although we intended to use it in the last one.

The Black Workers Congress says, "political lesson one grows directly out of the experience of many of us who have been organizing black, chicano, and Puerto Rican working class people". We think it also can be used with Indian, Asian, and white working class people. Our lives are full of examples of how racism, capitalism, imperialism, and sexism have affected each of us and made us want to fight for a revolutionary change in this country. Some of these examples we could tell right now, and some we aren't aware of yet. Get Acquainted sessions help us understand our own oppression, how capitalism works, how to explain it to others, and make us want to work harder for change, for a socialist revolution.

The BWC originally thought up the method after reading about the struggle of the Vietnamese people to control their own country. They say,

"In his book, Vietnam Will Win, Wilfred Burchett describes briefly some of the training programs that the South Vietnamese use to educate new recruits and one aspect involves discussions with new recruits about their life experiences and helping them to understand through their own experiences the effects of imperialism and United States aggression. ... That description in Vietnam Will Win, inspired some of us to think about what the Vietnamese were doing and how we could apply that to our reality."

So, in doing Get Acquainted sessions in the WSG, we are borrowing a lesson from the Vietnamese revolution, further developed by another revolutionary organization.

What is a Get Acquainted?

A Get Acquainted session is basically when a person analyzes and shares their history, and the oppression of the capitalist system that they have suffered, explaining why they have come to see the need for a basic change in this country. It usually includes some about that person's class background, jobs they've held, the family they come from, their education, ethnic and racial background, political history, etc. They tell the story of their life and why they have come to see the need to work for communism.

Why We Do Get Acquainted sessions

1) To show how capitalism, imperialism, racism, and sexism affect each person's life.

It is important to understand how the private profit system holds us back every day. Some of us understand this better than others, but to develop ourselves into revolutionaries who will struggle every day, we must understand how capitalism tears away each day at the humanity of all of us. As we said, many people are victims of the capitalist system and do not clearly understand this yet. The BWC

gives the example of a sister who was ashamed of the fact that her mother was killed by an overdose of heroin. She had hid this fact about her life until a Get Acquainted session. Through it she began to understand how the system of capitalism had killed her mother, and saw more clearly how she had a personal stake in getting rid of it.

2) To help us understand that often our personal weaknesses are caused by capitalism.

The capitalist system constantly grinds away the mental health of each of us, sometimes making us feel like we are going crazy. The oppression of this system leaves its scars on us. People who were embarrassed a lot in school might end up very shy. People who are ignored in families may end up demanding a lot of attention to themselves later on. People who are insecure might end up not listening to others, but only wanting to talk. People who read poorly may do so because they had to go to bad ghetto or barrio schools. Get Acquainted help us to understand that many of our weaknesses, come from the capitalist system, and therefore can only be finally gotten rid of with its overthrow, and the building of socialism. It gets us out of the capitalistic hustle mentality of only relating to people we think have "got it together", ignoring those who haven't, and helps us to understand the communist approach which is to realize that we all have inherited weaknesses from capitalism, and only by the help of us working together collectively, doing our revolutionary work can we overcome them.

3) To give us a good beginning at learning from each other

One of the things Mao Tse Tung said was, "In order to be a teacher of the masses, one must be a student of the masses." We are part of the masses and must learn from each other. Marxism teaches us to learn both from books and from real life. Get Acquainted help us to get to know each other so we can learn the most possible from each other during the Workers Study Group. One of the criticisms that members of the last Workers Study Group made that was correct was that we did not help people get to know each other early enough. So, we are also doing Get Acquainted to help rectify that mistake.

4) To help us understand that the masses, not great men make history.

We know that it is the masses, the common people of this society that make it go. We make all the things we need to live, we build things, transport things, run the factories, offices, hospitals, schools, etc. Get Acquainted help us to realize that it is the common people who must be respected, not the phony "leaders" who profit off our work. It helps us to stop looking for a single leader who will come and free us, but rather teaches us that only the actions of common people working together can make a revolution.

5) To encourage people to talk in a group

Shyness holds some people who could be strong revolutionaries back from explaining to interested people their anger at capitalism and their ideas for change. The BWC says, "There are many strong people who have shy personalities and within a Get Acquainted session we have witnessed many shy people develop strength to talk about their experiences and go forward to become strong revolutionary organizers." In the Introduction to the Workers Study Group that we already passed out, we said that our study had to be connected to the real life of this country, and to peoples real problems and experiences. So we hope that Get Acquainted sessions will help put people at ease so that in future meetings they will speak up with more examples, stories to tell, questions, and ideas.

6) To begin to lay the groundwork for future criticism, self-criticism, support.

Criticism, self-criticism is the communist method of helping each of us to change, and do better work for the revolution. We will study some about it later on in the study group. Right now we can say that Mao's slogan "no investigation, no right to speak", applies to people as well as all things. To do good criticisms and support of each other, we have to investigate ourselves, to know something about each other and why we do the things we do. Get Acquainted's help us get the information we need about each other to learn how to do good criticism, self-criticism later on.

7) To contribute to revolutionary theory by understanding life in the US

Revolutionary theory is the summed up experience and lessons of the working class movements of the past and present, in this country and others. Theory is something we inherit from past working class movements and from other countries, and is also something we must always build and develop for our revolution in this country. We develop revolutionary theory to guide our work in the United States by applying the lessons of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung Thought to the concrete conditions of the United States now. That means we must know both the theory that comes from the past, and the conditions in the US today. Get Acquainted's help us learn about the conditions in the lives of different people in this country. If we then apply theory to study those experiences, we can use them to help us develop more theory to guide the revolutionary movement in the US.

8) To help us become propagandists

As we learn more and more about capitalism in the US, and why communism is better for us, we will want to help other people learn to. To do this we will have to become propagandists, that is we will need to explain things to people. We must be able to use concrete examples to explain to fellow workers and friends why capitalism is at the root of our problems and how we can build communism. Get Acquainted's help us learn the concrete examples we can use to show people the truth about capitalism and communism, and also help us learn how to get other people to use their own experiences also to understand this.

9) To help us understand what kinds of help each of us can give to making a revolution.

Often times when people talk about their life histories and the oppression they have suffered themselves, we understand why people have strengths and weaknesses in different areas. That will tell us areas of work that different people can do. For example, someone who has suffered a lot of racial oppression will be best at helping to explain to others how racism divides us, and is a tool of the capitalists. A woman who has suffered a lot of oppression because of sexism will have strengths at being able to explain what sexism is, how it also divides us, and how we are all stronger when we fight for the freedom of women too. We might learn that someone else got taught a lot of mechanical things and so would be good at helping to run a printing press. Someone else who has raised children often knows a lot about how to help people, grow, change, and develop. We might learn that someone had to drop out of school very early and so has difficulty reading, and might need extra help. Get Acquainted's help us learn what strengths each of us have that can be used in revolutionary work, and what weaknesses each of us have that we'll need the help of our fellow revolutionaries to overcome.

10) To increase our security from possible agents, and unreliable people.

We know that the ruling class in this country, the bourgeoisie does not want a revolution in this country and will do almost anything to stop it. We know from

revolutions in other countries, and from our own revolutionary movement among blacks, chicanos, Indians, women, students, and workers over the last ten years that one of the ways the bourgeoisie tries to stop us is to send undercover police agents into revolutionary groups to spy for them. That is why we have to be careful who we let in, and must know them pretty well. Several times in the last 10 years we have seen police agents testify at trials against revolutionaries they worked closely with, but whom the revolutionaries knew little about. The lesson we have drawn from this is that it is always important to know who you are working with, and that knowing someone's life history is a good place to start. On the Venceremos Brigade to Cuba 7 years ago, one undercover agent was discovered because he told different life histories to different people. He had a hard time keeping his story straight cause it was all lies.

Not only do we want to protect ourselves from undercover agents, but also from unreliable people who can be pressured by the police to give information on our work, or who leak information accidentally without even knowing it. Someone who talks all the time can give information to an agent at a party without knowing it. Someone else who gets drunk or stoned constantly all the time can give out information easily and not know they did it. Or, someone who has spent most of their life in prison can be easy for the police to pressure into giving information by threatening to put him or her back in jail, on a parole violation. So, Get Acquainted help us flush out any police agents, and make sure we are working with people who understand how much power the bourgeoisie has at this point, and are therefore careful.

So, in conclusion, we sum up the reasons why we will do Get Acquainted sessions in the Workers Study Group, and why we think they are a valuable tool for all revolutionary groups to use:

- 1) to show how capitalism, imperialism, racism, & sexism affect each person's life
- 2) to help us understand that often our personal weaknesses are caused by capitalism
- 3) to give us a good beginning at learning from each other
- 4) to help us understand that the masses, not great men make history
- 5) to encourage people to talk in a group
- 6) to begin to lay the groundwork for future criticism, self-criticism, support
- 7) to contribute to revolutionary theory by understanding life in the US
- 8) to help us become propagandists
- 9) to help us understand what kinds of help each of us can give to making a revolution
- 10) to increase our security from possible agents, and unreliable people

How will we do Get Acquainted sessions?

We want to do beginning Get Acquainted. As you learn things in the Workers Study Group you will get better and better at understanding your own and other workers lives. For now, we'd like everyone to talk for about 20 minutes, and then leave about 20 minutes for questions and comments from other people. We'll aim for spending about 45 minutes on each person. The leadership of the WSG will do their Get Acquainted first. This will give people an example of what we are trying to do.

How should we prepare to do a Get Acquainted?

There are 3 things we should do to prepare. First, read and study this introduction and the five other articles we will be handing out with it. Second, is to think about what you will say in your own Get Acquainted and to make notes to help you when you talk. And third is to think of questions and things we want to know about the other people when they do their Get Acquainted.

We are handing out the following five articles to be read and studied:

- 1) Making of a Soldier, pgs. 13-15 of "Vietnam Will Win" by Wilfred Burchett
This is an example of how the Vietnamese revolutionary movement recruited and trained peasants and workers who were against the US invasion. This is where the Black Workers Congress got the idea for Get Acquainted sessions. The whole book "Vietnam Will Win" is an exciting book that we highly recommend to people for outside individual study. The cover says, "Why the people of South Vietnam have already defeated American imperialism and how they have done it." It was published in 1970, 4 years before the US had to admit defeat. It is an exciting story of how the common people of Vietnam organized themselves to defeat the largest military power in human history and has many lessons we can learn from.
- 2) A Five Minute Summary of 78 Years, by Donna Smith-Yackel, pgs. 2-3 of "Women: A Journal of Liberation," Spring, 1975. Its a good example of what to remember about your family's history.
- 3) Why I Became a Revolutionary, by Kirsten, pg. 6 of "White Lightning", #18, July, 1973 - both a newspaper & organization that organized all nationalities in New York, 1972-74. Its an example of a short Get Acquainted session telling her life history and why she decided to become a revolutionary.
- 4) Why I Became a Revolutionary, by ?, pg. 6 of "White Lightning", #17, June, 1973. Another example of a short Get Acquainted session that might help you think about your own.
- 5) Excerpt from "Major Doctrines of Communist China", by John Wilson Lewis, pgs. 190-191. This excerpt tells us about the "one key for one lock" method. It means helping someone learn the truth about capitalism and unlocking their desire to work for communism by answering the questions that most hold them back. It also means educating people about Marxism by using the areas they are most interested in at first. It is one of the most important parts of ideological education, which means changing the way someone thinks about the world or anything in it. "Ideological" means the way someone thinks. "Ideological problems of the masses" are problems in the way the masses think. "Ideological work" means work to change the way the masses think. These two pages help us to understand one of the reasons for doing Get Acquainted sessions - that is, to understand each particular person well so that we can fit the key of their Marxist education to unlock them with communism and desire to work for it.

Remember to try to read all these articles twice, and to put ? marks beside parts you didn't understand or what to ask about, another mark, like a check, beside parts you want to say something about, and to underline the most important points to remember.

The second part of the preparation for a good Get Acquainted session is thinking over what you want to say and making notes to help you remember it. We don't just want any old rap for 20 minutes, we want to know things that will help us understand you. Try to answer the following 3 questions in your Get Acquainted session:

- 1) what are the most important things in your life that made you who you are?
- 2) how have you or your family & friends been messed over by capitalism the most?
- 3) what made you want to begin to fight back, & learn about communism?

To do this you might want to tell us: where you grew up, what kind of life people there had, what your family was like, what your parents & grandparents did for a living, important things that happened to your family & to you, how your family & friends thought about things, what school was like for you & how far you went & why you stopped, what kinds of jobs you've had, if you've been in the service, if & when you get married, if you had kids, how many, what changes they made in your life, what racial things happened to you as a white, black, chicano, Indian, or Asian, how and when you began to understand the system was messed up, what made you decide to fight against it, what you think you need to learn to fight, what you think about communism, etc.

As you think of these things, make some notes so that when you come and talk you can be sure you don't leave out some important things, or talk to long about little

things. Its not easy to tell your life story in 15-20 minutes, and notes will help you a lot. The notes can be very simple, or complicated, whatever will help you the most. Some people may be too nervous to talk and want to write out their Get Acquainted ahead of time and then come and read them. Again, the kind of written preparation people do is up to them, but everyone should do some. Here is an example of what short notes might look like:

born poor white in the South

large family, parents farmed & cut lumber

moved to LA when I was 10 for jobs

Dad worked in steel, then auto - Mom worked as waitress, housecleaning, then paper
always in trouble at school, dropped out in 10th grade, bored plant

worked in gas station, glass factory, then rubber plant

brother send to Vietnam, hurt bad

sister on drugs, committed suicide by an OD

family worked hard all their lives but never had anything

could see people getting messed over all the time

met a communist, did some talking & reading, and want@d to check out Marxism more

Again, everyone should make notes of some kind. Most of us don't know how to write very well now, but to be revolutionaries we will have to learn slowly but surely over the next few years. Making notes is a good step for that too.

The last way people should prepare is to try to think of questions they might want to ask other people when they give their Get Acquainted. For instance, if you already have met a couple of people in the Workers Study Group and want to know them better, think about what you want to know about them.

Good luck. We're anxious to learn about each other through the Get Acquainted.