

Presentation on Southern California Local Center Experience
National OCIC Conference. September 2, 1979, by I.M.

There's a good saying from the Chinese experience about summarizing experience. It says, "Only with the whole situation in mind, and typical examples in hands can we have the initiative in leading the movement." I think Pat has done a good job of laying out the 'whole' on local centers. Now it's my job to try to sum up some lessons from our specific experience in Southern California. I'm not so sure how "typical" our example is, how applicable it will be to other locales. It will be up to OC members at large and the NSC to assess the lessons we've learned and determine which ones are universal to the OCIC as a whole. I do know that the questions raised in developing a local center take on the larger political questions of the struggle to build an ideological center itself. Because of the nature of a local center as a non-sectarian form where organizations, groupings, and individuals can actively participate in a process of developing an ideological center on the basis of political struggle and unity and not on the basis of organizational affiliation----the local center challenges errors in past party building efforts. It challenges us to embrace the party spirit and to put the whole of the movement before our individual part. It challenges us to put ideological struggle and unification before organizational consolidation.

I know a lot of us in the local center have squirmed uncomfortably when the national has pointed to So. California as an advanced experience because of all the problems we've had, and the errors we've made. But if advanced experience means being on the "front lines" of developing local centers---that's where we've been: And perhaps we have most to teach from the contradictions we've confronted and the weaknesses we've had in dealing with them.

I want to do two things today: Deepen the "Working Evaluation" of May, and Update you on developments in our local center since it was written.

The local center work in So. Calif. began in the form of a steering committee composed of representatives from an organization and two small groupings. Because both of these groupings had primarily centered their work on the developments of the OCIC in the previous period and not on the direction and consolidation of practice, their members' need to relate to each other within their small groups dissolved, and they became individuals in the local center process. The local center steering committee (lcsc) tried to develop our work in the context of minimal national guidance. From the NSC, we had no understanding of the strategic nature of local centers in the party building process of building an IC. We had no continuous guidance regarding our concrete local conditions. And most importantly we lacked a leading line for our work---a Draft Plan for an IC. This was particularly serious in light of the fact that our task was to consolidate our own forces around, and draw the broader tendency into the process of forging an IC.

Within this context, the lcsc made its primary error---of not unifying ideologically around the role of the local center and the role of the ideological center in our party building efforts. The plan we were given by the NSC tended to center around the internal structure of the steering committee itself, and not on the political issues involved in developing the local center at large and the IC. We in turn applied the plan mechanically; primarily dealing with the organizational aspect of setting up the steering committee, instead of dealing with essential political questions involved in developing our work. It was this error of not studying, struggling, and unifying around fundamental ideological issues that led to other serious errors in our work.

Without this ideological consolidation, the majority of lcsc members were unable to identify and combat the right errors of a lcsc participant in a timely conscious way. Our failure to combat this incorrect line allowed the obstruction of the development of the local center at large. Our failure to develop and wage an open two-line struggle on the roles of the IC, OC, and LC allowed political divisions in the OCIC as a whole in our locale to brew without ideological struggle and education, and produced unneeded polarization. Part of the difficulty in indentifying and combatting the line early on was the way in which it was put forward. Because of the lack of respect for ideological work in general and the local center in particular inherent in the line itself, this lcsc member did not pay much attention to the local center process in the first period. He attended meetings inconsistently, came poorly prepared, and didn't make fundamental differences clear. The member effectively obstructed the process in a sectarian manner without taking timely responsibility to put forward a minority position.

His line was put forward, and we combatted it—piece meal. During the discussion of a plan for our work, he rejected the notion of the need for any plan. Underlying this rejection was a resistance to national leadership of a local process. The member proposed that the local center be an administrative body of a coalition of organizations; denying the role of individuals in the process and the primacy of political struggle and unity over organizational strength. The member objected to the notion of organizational representatives not receiving binding instructions from the organization. This was particularly ironic since the member himself did not seek guidance from his organization on the local center process through out this period. He proposed that the lcsc take up responsibility for a chapter of a mass work committee in L.A. that his organization participated in in Orange Co. As it became clear that the local center should not direct practice, it became clearer to this member that there was no real role for the local center.

He resisted ideological study and discussion internal to the lcsc. He saw no relationship between our outreach work and ideological unification. His line was join now, study and struggle later. He rejected the notion of the local center being an educational forum

for all OCIC members. He insisted that SOC have total autonomy from the local center process. That SOC be exclusively responsible for education of its members on all OCIC issues. The irony here was that SOC members were not being educated internal to the organization on OCIC issues during this period, with the exception of good preparation for the point 18 conference. Although this member was the direct link between the lcsc and the leadership body of SOC, he did not keep SOC informed on the local center process and developing contradictions. Differences began to develop between the two SOC representatives on the lcsc. On the one hand, the member holding the minority line would insist that whatever ^{the other representative} put forward was the position of SOC because she was the primary representative from SOC and the co-chair of the l.c. On the other hand whenever she disagreed with him, she was characterized as being disloyal to SOC.

As differences between the two SOC representatives intensified, the minority view finally put out his position in a paper. This was a significant and helpful development because it opened up the two line struggle within the lcsc clearly and politically; and revealed the ideological differences underlying his position. The paper maintained that the primary task of the communist movement in this period is building the mass movement. There is no significant national work except coordinated practice in the class. An example would be PWOC's sponsorship of the health workers conference. National leadership of a local center is premature. Leadership of the local center should come from the local cadre organization which is the only qualified source of leadership. Any attempt for the local center to educate SOC members on OCIC issues is premature centralism. SOC delegates are elected by SOC, and can therefore be recalled by SOC at any time. Recruitment to the local cadre organization should be an important feature of the local center.

Off of this paper, the lcsc began to deepen its analysis of the two-line struggle, and its criticisms of this members participation. The deepening differences between its representatives on the lcsc became clearer to SOC leadership body, and they put out a self-criticism about not keeping on top of the process of the local center and not giving their representatives sufficient guidance. Another SOC representative began attending meetings and united with majority perspective on the role of the local center and the O.C. in developing an IC. The lcsc conducted a principaled political struggle session with the lcsc member holding the minority viewpoint. The participant accepted no criticisms, and unfortunately interpreted political struggle as a personal attack on his integrity. He resigned from the lcsc and subsequently resigned from SOC itself. All OC members in our locale consider that a real loss to the process of ideological struggle and unification in our locale.

Let me quickly clarify something about the role of SOC before going on. Although federationist tendencies have come out of SOC, SOC as an organization has never acted as a block in a federationist manner. Both within the lcsc in the early period, and now within the local center at large, SOC members have presented their political differences to the body as a whole.

There is still a low understanding in our locale of the inter-relationship between the primary right error that the lcsc made of not unifying ideologically on OC/LC issues and our primary left error of staying internal so long without opening up the local center to the OC membership at large. *na* Its my understanding that left errors often follow right ones. Because we weren't unified ideologically we were unable to combat right errors which insisted that SOC membership be autonomous from the local center process. We allowed ourselves to be cut off from the majority of OC members in our locale by this line and proceeded to consolidate ourselves too far ahead of the base of the local center.

In the last period the damage done by staying internal so long has become clearer by the minute through the kinds of political divisions that exist among our OCIC membership.

One of the real problems during this struggle has been the lack of consistent theoretical leadership from the NSC on the nature of federationism, organizational hegemony, and localism. We are encouraged by the NSC's self-criticism in this area and their commitment to dealing with it in the future. Combined with a lack of theoretical education on the nature and roots of these errors, and how they have manifested themselves in past party building efforts, there's been a lack of analysis of our own conditions and how they connect to these errors. The objective base of the OCIC as it stands now is overwhelmingly organizations. The NSC must look at where we're at now and how we move from here in the struggle against federationism. It must show how OC forces can move from the shallower to the deeper in the battle against the small circle spirit. How we can use our strengths to overcome our weaknesses. It must deal with the difficult questions of how an organization's entire membership are represented and participate in the party building effort. It must acknowledge the special contributions that all-sided organizations can make to ideological centralization through their ability to unite theory with practice and serve as arenas for the development, summation and testing of advanced experiences. The NSC must show how the battle against federationism and the building of an IC will push forward cadre organizations work. It must point out the special role that individuals can play in combatting federationism.

I want to move on now to update you on significant developments in the work of our local center since the sum up was written in May.

The most significant thing that's happened is that we've broken out of the lcsc and opened up the local center to the entire OC membership of Southern California. I can't stress enough how important it is to move to a stage where all OC members, whether in an organization or not, are local center members. The local center provides a forum for people to present their ideas on OC issues and struggle them out with different views in the tendency. This summer we've had four local center forums internal to OC members. We've had two meetings evaluating the local center, a meeting on the OC evaluation and one on the draft plan in order to prepare for the conference.

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 Our first forum on the local center evaluation signalled need to shift the priority of tasks in the local center from outreach being primary in the immediate period to consolidation of OC members. The discussion revealed that there was a lack of knowledge and real differences among the membership at large on the role of local centers and our particular history. The lcsc realized that these problems also pointed to a shallow understanding and differences among our membership on the general OC perspective of building the IC and its role in party building. The right errors that had manifested themselves in the early lcsc period had a real grip on some members at large. The lcsc decided to have the discussion on the OC evaluation and the draft plan in between the two discussions on the local center in order to put our local situation in a national perspective.

I'd like to try to put forward the minority position in our locale. It's not easy to get a handle on. Because of some of the weaknesses in the position itself---stemming from belittling ideological work and localism---it is not well consolidated. There is no one position or voice, and the viewpoint remains largely unarticulated. A small minority state differences with the general conception of the OC and the IC. A larger minority say they unite with the general conception/ but that their differences revolve around our specific local center history. All maintain that we do not have political line differences, but merely tactical differences. Although I'll try to put forward the diversity of views among the minority position, its incumbent upon those who hold these views to develop their position, and articulate it for the OC.

The small minority's differences regarding general conception:

1. Primacy of practice in the class and mass movements in this period of party building. It belittles the leading role of ideological work in this stage of party building.

2. Mistrust of the implementation of the principle "from the center out" and the "national must lead the local". Consider these principles applicable at some point, but premature in this period.

3. Primacy of cadre organizations as the building blocks of the IC. The local center is a premature form which threatens the primary role of cadre organizations in building the IC.

4. The present demarcation of the tendency through the 18 points may be incorrect. For example, point 18 may not be as crucial a line of demarcation as the position on fusion. We should unite with those who we can do trade union practice with.

5. Delegates to the lcsc and to national conferences should be bound by the instructions of their organizations, although both majority and minority positions should be presented. Delegates should vote representationally according to the number of people who hold each position within the organization.

A larger minority has differences with the particular history of the local center steering committee. All are in agreement with the strengths, but they differ on the weaknesses.

1. There was never a two-line struggle within the lcsc---only tactical differences.

2. Although federationism is a danger in general, there were no manifestations of it in the locale. To identify errors in the lcsc as federationist, is dogmatic.

3. One person maintains that all errors in the lcsc came primarily from the left instead of the right. For example, while the lcsc maintains that we applied the plan mechanically, putting organizational aspects before political ones; she maintains that we applied it dogmatically.

4. Another person disagrees that the national gave too little leadership. She maintains that they gave too much. That the national over-extended their authority in the So. Calif. local center.

5. This person disagrees that the lcsc should ideologically consolidate itself before developing the local center at large.

6. Another puts forward that lcsc should have been elected by the body at large. (This position neither allows that the lcsc was selected representationally in the beginning by SOC and two groupings, nor does it recognize that the minority viewpoint in the lcsc insisted that the life of the local center be exclusive of OC membership at large. Now that the local center is the whole OCIC membership, selection of the lcsc and the chair should be elected from the body as whole.)

We're still dealing with these contradictions in the locale. We think it's time to open up the process to the OC as a whole. We also request that a member of the NSC come to our locale within the next few months to lend their perspective to the process.

Although this has been a painful process in light of the political divisions in our locale, opening up ideological education and struggle in our locale has been very productive----a good thing! Preparing for the conference has marked a real leap forward for us. The discussions initiated the beginning of a division of labor in the local center at large where different members could put their talents to use. The discussions were planned by committees which represented both people on the steering committee and off/ both SOC cadre and L.A. individuals. The primary purpose of the forums was for people to put forward their respective positions on the documents/ not at this stage to struggle out unity. The secondary purpose was to provide feedback to the national. We succeeded at both.

Opening up the local center to the entire membership shows the importance of developing a division of labor in our work. It means assessing the valuable contributions that different participants can

make in different areas----and providing opportunities to put their talents to work.

1. For example, the preparation for the conference showed the potential for developing committees on educational work for OC members, and the broader tendency.

2. Also, in the recent period, it's become clearer that the local center can become a vehicle through committee work for collective theoretical work to contribute to the national process. I think there's particular potential and resources in our area to contribute to the work on the nature of ultra-leftism in the party building movement. Because of our need in the immediate period to unify our forces around the general perspective of the OC and the strategic necessity of drawing all forces in the tendency into an active effort to develop a plan for the IC, these tasks would be primary over deeper theoretical work in the present period. The secondary nature of this work in the present period does not downplay its importance, potential or our commitment to put it into practice.

3. Another area that members could make contributions to the work of the center would be the summation of practical work for local center forums; providing the tendency at large with lessons from advanced experience.

4. Also cadre involved in different areas of mass work could identify and contact people who might be interested in the effort to build an IC and begin to develop propaganda relationships with them.

The value of this division of labor for outreach work is that it would provide avenues of participation for incoming members.

Another important development since our sum up has been a significant increase in the quality and quantity of national guidance. The NSC has developed a strategic sense of local centers in building the IC. It has deepened its consciousness of the need to address the dangers of federationism and localism in the context of our concrete conditions. And most importantly the NSC has put forward a leading line for our work, through the OC evaluation and the Draft Plan.

The OC evaluation lays out the tasks for the OC in the next period. This clarifies the work of the local center, and the contributions we can make to our locale and the national process. The tasks of further developing the draft plan and consolidating the tendency around it, of summing up the nature of ultra-leftism, of educating and uniting our forces more deeply around the 18 points, of deepening our understanding of the struggle against racism are all tasks which will clearly push forward the ideological struggle and unification of current OCIC forces, and the broader tendency.

The most important national development in relationship to local centers is the initial draft plan for an IC. The draft plan is crucial to both internal consolidation and outreach work of the

local center. It's the heart of our work. We must develop a solid, clear, readable draft plan for all members of the tendency.

Another significant development in the recent period of the local center has been a deepening of our understanding of outreach work as we launched our first introduction discussions. I won't try to sum up the introduction classes today because of time. Four of five sessions have been completed. We'll distribute a sum up soon. Instead I'd like to share some general lessons from our outreach work.

1. The importance of ideological education and struggle in unifying forces around the IC and LC. We must concentrate on the ideological issues involved in forging these processes, and not on the organizational aspects. This lesson calls for an understanding that outreach with many in the broader tendency will a protracted process in order to unify politically instead of organizationally.

Most of the individuals attracted to the OC in our locale have been turned off by ultra leftism of past party building efforts. They concentrate their efforts in mass practice---primarily in anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles. They operate on the periphery of the party building movement. Their commitment to party building as the central task facing Marxist-Leninists is still tenuous. Bringing these people into the life of the local center will require special education on the centrality of party building and the role of the IC within it.

Understanding the importance of ideological work requires not only a recognition that the process will be protracted, but also that it will require creating different forms for different people. Some may need one on one discussions before entering introductory discussions, etc.

2. Our understanding of the role of practice in building ideological unity with others has deepened. The lcsc has always been clear that the local center itself should not and effectively can not guide or direct practice. Pat laid out why well in her opening presentation. Nor has the lcsc been under the illusion that being involved in mass practice with forces would be the primary ingredient in drawing them into an active effort to build an IC.

But what we have found is that participation of OC forces in mass practice and in the summation of that practice is key for many in developing relationships where ideological education and struggle can take place. We have found that this connection between our theory and our practice is particularly key in developing relationships with Minority Marxist-Leninists.

Both in our relationships with a primarily third world, multi-racial

study group, and with a Black cadre organization; people have made it clear to us how important they understand the involvement of white communists in anti-racist work as a means of overcoming racism in the party building movement itself. In a recent meeting with several Black M-L's we talked about initiating some discussions on party building perspective. The cadre agreed and said they wanted to make it clear that they entered into these ideological discussions with us because they had seen us apply theory to practice and therefore trusted our ideological bearings. That ideological discussions would deepen in the context of ongoing practice and summation of practice.

This discussion brings me to another crucial point we've learned through outreach work....

3. The necessity to seriously take up the questions of the centrality of the struggle against racism among our own forces and with the broader tendency. That means strong consistent leadership from the national on the nature of racism, the history of racism in past party building efforts, how it manifests itself within our own ranks, and how we can effectively combat it. It also demands that every OC member commit themselves to a serious study of racism and a dedicated application of that study to all areas of our communist work.

In Southern California, OC forces are currently all white. Like many OC members we are generally unconsolidated around the centrality of the struggle against racism in the communist movement. An indication of this is the immature understanding of the connection between racism and federationism.

In all of our contact with Minority M-L's in the last period, the importance of taking up the issue of racism among white communists in order to engage in ideological struggle and unification has been put straight out on the table. Recently in a discussion with members of a black cadre organization, a leading member requested that we begin our political discussions together with what local OC forces mean by "the centrality of the struggle against racism". He said in his experience with white communists in the past, they did one of two things. They either were involved in anti-racist struggles and saw the struggle against racism totally outside of themselves; or they only took up the struggle against racism internally in a moralistic, self-defeating way. He wanted to know how we understood the connection and particularly how we took up the struggle against racism among ourselves.

Clearly, seriously taking up the question of racism in all its aspects both internally and with the broader tendency will be key in implementing the conception of local centers.

4. Another important lesson we've learned in conducting ideological education and struggle with forces in the broader tendency is the importance of deepening the critique of ultra-leftism.

This has been learned most dramatically in our recent struggles with the rectification forces in our locale, where it's become very clear the grip that ultra-leftism has on forces within the anti-left tendency itself.

We need to sum up our discussion with them on party building perspective, the experience of several OC members in the Soviet Union study project, and our struggle with them over the National Minorities Conference (which I mentioned yesterday has already been summed up) and analyze these experiences in light of what we have learned about the dangers of the small circle spirit. We need to demonstrate for OCIC members how these experiences point to the crucial importance of ideologically consolidating ourselves and the tendency as a whole around the nature of ultra-leftism.

5. Another lesson that we've learned through our outreach work is the fundamental importance that drawing a firm line of demarcation on Principle 18 has played in attracting forces to the politics and efforts of the OCIC.

6. Recently cadre from PWOC and FTP came to our area, and gave presentations at local center public forums. This taught us the final lesson I want to tell you about----The positive role that having visitors from other locales in the OCIC speak at open forums can play in our work---Both for establishing a public presence for the OCIC in our locale, and for deepening the understanding of our membership on OCIC issues as well as the practice and deeper basis of unity of different OC forces.

I'll wrap it up there. Now we'll open up the subject of local centers for discussion. Pat and I thought we could begin by getting a sense of the understanding of the body on

1. The importance of the struggle against federationism, organizational hegemony and localism in developing ideological struggle and unity in the tendency

2. The role local centers can play in combatting these errors

3. The relationship between federationism and racism.

Then we can get into a discussion of particular questions and issues that people want to raise.