

WHY WE LEAVE THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISTS

The watershed year of 1968 with its mass working class upsurge in France sparked by student demonstrations, plus worker uprisings and the establishment of worker's councils in Czechoslovakia, laid to rest, once and for all, all the soothsayer proclamations about the impotence of the working class as the agency for social revolution; about the workers incapacity for self-activity; and about the lack of need for revolutionary organization to help carry things through.

It was in response to these same events that in America student radicals (and a thin layer of older cadre, who came through the debacle of previous revolutionary organizations) established the International Socialists. It was particularly to the credit of these younger revolutionaries, who took the lead, that they moved away from the new left (and ultra-left) adventurism, triumphalism, and third worldism, so prevalent in the 60's. It was to their credit that they took their ideas seriously -- they moved off campus into the industrial centers, entered the shops, tried to integrate themselves into the working class and the unions, built a revolutionary socialist organization -- the IS-- and embarked on the discovery of an ideology for working class political, economic and social struggles.

The IS sought to establish and deepen its links with the American working class, work out a correct relationship between party and class, and promote the self-organization and activity of the working class. No one else did this better than the IS in its early days. So much so, that this beginning laid the foundation and held the promise for a healthy and successful intervention in the coming class conflicts within the USA.

Today, that anticipation is gone. The IS is shattered as an organization. Its membership is largely depoliticized and declining. It is wracked by the inability of its leadership to provide any meaningful direction, and is demoralized by the leadership's impotence.

Above all, the IS is sliding rightward, politically, particularly in the wake of its increasingly conservatized unionists. Some of these industrial radicals want to support Democrats. Some increasingly subordinate themselves to certain "reform" labor leaders. Some believe that openly raising socialist ideas in rank-and-file organizations is tantamount to abusing those organizations. And an increasing number see little need for a socialist organization at all.

We believe that the IS experiment is now over and that the IS is finished as a viable organization. There is nothing we can do to turn it around and get back on the main track. Our differences are deepgoing, longstanding, have proven to be unresolvable, and it is time for us to leave. And it's a sad time -- for we had a deep stake in the IS, in its past and in its potential.

All this came about, we believe, because the IS gave up on its central kernel of truth: that it is the working class itself, through its own self-activity, self-reliance and self-organization, that can lead and win the struggle for its own emancipation, free all of society and lay the basis for socialist democracy. No other agency can substitute for this. No party, no other leadership can. A party, a leadership, can aid the process -- can even be indispensable for the task -- but these cannot substitute or replace the class as it acts in its own interests. The IS's loss of memory of this singular notion, despite repeated verbal denials, has led to its present state -- and, in reality, to its demise.

In an important sense, revolutionary politics is the politics of the possible. To know what is possible to achieve at this moment and the immediate period ahead, and thus be able to plan the next step realistically, is as important as being clear on long term goals.

In the early 70's, what was possible was quite limited by the low and mixed levels of consciousness, as well as the limited combativity of the American working class. Rank and file organizations in the plants and in the unions were virtually nonexistent. (Only today is there one real, albeit small, nationally-based rank and file group -- the TDU.) These conditions and the lack of a significant Left presence rendered unlikely any substantial short-run radicalization in the working class.

Given this state of affairs (which continues today despite a few cracks and small fissures), what was then politically possible was: (1) implantation in and attempts to make connection with the ranks of the American working class both in industry and the public sector; (2) recruitment in modest numbers, by ones and twos, of radicals who share our working class perspective, workers, students and oppressed people around a full revolutionary socialist program; (3) a concerted effort to develop, educate and integrate them into a cadre organization; (4) selective intervention in a wide spectrum of arenas, beginning with the workplace, but including various movements of the oppressed; (5) collaboration with individuals and other organizations on common projects; (6) political and theoretical development of important class questions, as well as how to organize against the special oppression of blacks, women, gays, etc.; (7) open and democratic functioning so that the revolutionary organization becomes a melting pot of rich, original and inventive ideas emanating from every level of the organization.

This is not a grandiose perspective, but one based on the revolutionary politics of the possible. It is based on the current level of class struggle and consciousness and the modest numbers attracted to radical ideas today, let alone revolutionary organizations. Not only were these modest goals necessary in the mid-70s (and today), *but it is a stage we cannot bypass.*

In retrospect, it is apparent that the IS only shared this perspective abstractly. For by 1974, the leaders and many of the ranks of the IS were becoming impatient with the slow pace of events. In mid-1975, the IS began a new course, called "the turn". What was new about the "turn" was *not* the movement to industrialization (that had been going on

in the IS since 1970). Nor was it the recognition that, at times, even in today's low level of working class militancy, agitation by socialists is possible and, therefore, necessary. What *was* new was a fundamental capitulation to the ideology of voluntarism. Impatient with the slow pace of events, the IS cadres persuaded themselves that *their* leadership through agitation in the plants could change the situation within the working class. While new to the IS, this false voluntarist strategy has a long history on the Left.

The specific rationale for this "turn" was as follows: Capitalism was in deep crisis. We would soon have massive unemployment and an annual inflation rate of 20%, they predicted. The workers were ready to move, the IS said, but were held back by their misleaders -- the labor bureaucrats. All that was necessary, therefore, was for the IS cadre to give a "lead". The workers, in significant numbers, were even ready to join the IS, if we approached them properly, the IS leaders pronounced. All that was needed was a "turn toward Bolshevization", a "turn toward agitation", and above all, no nonsense (especially, no truck with any elements of the Left). And away we went... This time with superactivism, ultra-hardness, an agitational newspaper, and nothing and no one to get in our way.

It was, in short, an attempt to substitute organizational hardness and voluntarist determination for political clarity -- a course which was bound to lead to depoliticization of the cadre, and their demoralization as well, in the face of the defeats ahead for their strategy.

Translated into IS jargon, this meant a disciplined and monolithic central leadership which hid its differences from *both* the IS membership *and* the National Committee. It meant directives to the branches, appointment of *local* leaders, an end to meaningful representation of differing viewpoints on national leadership bodies, censorship of membership discussion bulletins for "relevance", since, supposedly, workers don't want to be bothered with "irrelevancies".

IS democracy was thus one of the first victims of the "turn". For just as the IS tried to substitute itself for the self-activity of the class, the IS *leadership* tried to substitute *itself* for the IS *membership*. To eliminate contention, they began by driving out dissenters, first by ones and then in groups. (Although this was usually done in accord with their new version of "formal" democratic norms, its message was that disagreement with the leadership was simply not tolerated.)

But IS democracy was only the first victim of the "turn". The historic position and practice of the IS on the black movement and women's liberation was also undermined.

On the black question, the "turn" meant that in effect the IS began to surrender its former position favoring independent organization of blacks. This was especially the case in the unions, where the call for and defense of blacks' right to organize black caucuses was forgotten. But even *within* the IS, the black caucuses disappeared and the oft-promised Black Liberation pamphlet never even appeared at all.

All this was done under the cover of advocacy of "Black and White, unite and fight". Later (below) this tendency was further accentuated when the IS began to adapt programatically to the labor "reform movement".

A few examples should suffice: First, at the 1977 TDU convention, a motion by a black teamster calling on TDU to officially oppose Bakke was ruled out of order by an IS comrade in the chair. (The IS teamster group had earlier decided against raising this issue.) And secondly, during the more recent adaptation to the reform leaders' stage, ISers objected to the formation of a black caucus in the Detroit TDU chapter and, having failed, tried to dilute its character by insisting that the committee actively deal with issues affecting human rights of whites as well (such as conditions in sub-standard shops, etc.).

In general, the increasingly conservative IS union practice operated against any orientation to black community struggles. As a result there were constant complaints by ISers who were involved in community work that the IS did not take their work seriously, and such work was gradually abandoned.

A parallel development occurred with respect to the women's movement. The IS' previous dedication to fighting for the special needs of women, while never renounced, got lost in the organization's essentially economist, and later opportunist conduct in the work place. This retreat took many forms:

To start with, during the "turn", the IS subordinated the women's question by IS's *opposition* to women comrades taking jobs in those industries in which women workers predominated. This was done on the illusory ground that women militants in heavy industry were automatically destined to become the leaders of a future working women's movement. This false assessment had grave consequences: First, it inevitably deepened the IS's isolation from the autonomous women's movement whose focus was on the family and reproductive rights. Almost no women were recruited in the plants; few could be won elsewhere, given this orientation; others left the organization. Secondly, the exclusive focus on women in IBT, UAW, and Steel, led to a de facto end to the women's caucus of the IS. (It was "just another meeting", irrelevant to the ongoing work).

The demise of the women's caucus was hastened by the conservative character of the work in the unions. And, during the post "turn" period, the entire issue of women's reproductive rights was surrendered within the unions, out of fear of alienating or embarrassing the reform leaders. Instead, the IS, deepening its accommodation to the reform leaders, began to focus on NOW (Fraser's new ally).

But even earlier, in the UAW, the IS had argued that: (a) women's demands were being adequately met by our proposal for a 32-hour week. This, said the IS, was really a demand for more jobs for women, since women had been the worst hit by the 1974-75 layoffs. (b) IS opposed a special demand for child-care on the ground that it would not be taken seriously and, therefore, should not be raised in any way.

The radical loss of objectivity represented by the "Turn" should not of course obscure its positive elements, which came about as a by-product. The pace of industrialization, and therefore the composition and climate in the organization improved. The organization more aggressively sought out opportunities to intervene in the class struggle and became very proficient and skillful in organizing such interventions. These represented a significant advance over previous IS functioning (although IS had in truth been heading in these directions for some time). But these gains were not sufficient to overcome the disastrous consequences of the Turn, as outlined above.

By 1977, the follies of the "turn" and its failure became evident. The balance sheet showed fewer members, a lower political level, demoralization, and at best, a handful of indigenous workers.

But even errors can be instructive. If the lessons of the mistaken turn had been learned, all might yet be well. It was necessary for the IS to recognize that while workers actions opens them up to radical ideas, workers do not automatically adopt them. In addition to fighting alongside the workers in struggle, it is also necessary to wage an *ideological* struggle against the bureaucrats' reformist ideas. The role of *politics* in advancing *even* the day-to-day struggle had to be acted on. Otherwise, even a relatively advanced rank-and-file group such as TDU is vulnerable to reform bureaucrats (as the recent IBT local elections demonstrated). Otherwise, even those few recruits who were won to the socialist movement could not be retained.

But the lessons of the "turn" were not learned. And could not be learned. Essentially this was because the IS had become profoundly depoliticized during the "turn". This was due to: (a) the radical depreciation of the importance of theory and education of the cadre (only "training" seemed important); (b) the collapse of socialist democratic functioning (i.e., bottom-up membership political initiatives and political control), and its replacement by, at best, formal bourgeois *top-down* democracy; and (c) the totally depoliticized character (totally agitational) of the group's work in the mass movement.

As a result, the IS, and not just the leadership, was unprepared politically to deal with the lack of motion in those arenas where IS cadre were involved (at that time). And this, in turn, led to the wrong empiricist lessons of the "turn", i.e., to an easy adaptation to the rightward pressures emanating from today's labor movement.

This accomodationist virus took its most virulent form in an adaptation to a new substitutionist force which would lead the working class. This time, it was not the IS but a reform layer in the unions, a reform leadership which would provide direction for the rank and file.

With this new turn, the IS passed from being merely sidetracked, to actual derailment. For in proposing the "new" theory, the IS *accepted*, in *practice*, the illusions which most workers have in such reform leaders. The workers fail to see the limits and dangers of these reform leaders. Such limits flow from the union leaders seeing their role as policing the workers (not the bosses), in compliance with the contract.

This new form of substitutionism was and is far more serious for the IS than its earlier form. For there is a long history of literally thousands of reform leaders who, once in office, are forced by the logic of contract unionism to become union bureaucrats. Arnold Miller and Harry Patrick are only the most dramatic recent examples. Even more recent are the newly elected local reform leaders in the IBT. Once elected they almost universally began to distance themselves from TDU and PROD.

The consequences of uncritical support of and high expectations from this stratum of leaders are disastrous. For if these leaders are a valid instrument for rank-and-file leadership, then there is no longer any imperative to build autonomous and independent rank-and-file organizations. This logic has begun to be accepted within the IS (see the IS Miners pamphlet, and the article on steel in Changes' first issue). Further, inevitably, the at times necessary critical support to reform leaders in union elections must give way to full endorsement. Furthermore, why support independent black caucuses within the unions, since this will invariably alienate the reformers?

Indeed, the reformers are alienated by many things. They don't like socialists around (except for support work) spreading their socialist ideas and, above all, encouraging independent self activity of the ranks. They don't like criticism, especially from the Left. And they don't like people who don't like the reformers' allies -- Democratic politicians. So if one begins to be soft on this layer of leaders one must inevitably begin to grow soft on all these other areas (Democratic Party, etc.) as well. And finally, why continue as a revolutionary socialist organization at all except in the most residual, nominal form?

Should the IS continue (without us) in such a residual form, then the tendency for adaptation rightward will continue beyond the rightward drift which it has already demonstrated. In just the past few months, this tendency has already accelerated. First, when members of the IS proposed supporting Democratic Party candidates, in Gary. Perhaps even more significant was a statement by an IS leader which appeared in the IS magazine Changes (issue number 3): "And I also raise that anyone who holds controversial views, whether its left wing, right wing, or whatever, has a responsibility to keep them to themselves to a large degree within TDU. You have no right to use an organization that you help build to promote your own political beliefs."

Policies such as these are all of a kind. They parallel an IS leader's nomination of Harry Patrick, former UMW Secretary-Treasurer, as an honorary member of TDU, at a time when he had just participated in breaking the massive miners wildcat strikes, and had earlier aided in disbanding the rank-and-file miners organization, the MFD. The speed with which the IS has abandoned its early rank-and-file orientation is similarly manifested by the fact that the IS has now, in the name of "realism", stopped arguing for building a national rank and file movement in the mines, in steel, and even points to the "dangers" (to reform leaders and activists) of national independent rank-and-file organizations.

The irreversible logic of this drift rightward is the organizational as well as political liquidation of the IS. Two recent examples will suffice: The most recent decision to become a Federation of branches is not precluded for all

time. The question is, what is the content and political direction of this organizational change, at this particular moment in time? In this case, the change is an expression of the continuing move to the right. So, for example, giving the *branches* autonomy will, in this case, permit the branches to support Democrats, i.e., *allow* a further opening to the right, while the national office may be reluctant to go so far. At the same time, however, the Federation proposal would continue strictures against the left wing. This is the intent of retaining "discipline" in the IS-IBT *fraction*, which is divided into right and left wings. Such discipline would make it impossible for the left to fight for its views in TDU on the relation of the rank-and-file to reform leaders.

Similarly, a new turn toward a "regroupment" strategy is currently being explored by the IS (though it is doubtful that the trade-union wing of the group takes this proposal seriously). Again, it is the political direction and content of the "regroupment" which is decisive, not the concept itself (which our tendency shares). The regroupment which the IS has in mind has two failings: (1) it incorrectly rejects the need for a politically cohesive group in a period such as the present -- one of a low level of class struggle; and (2) it would further dilute its residual revolutionary politics and make the drift rightward easier to pursue (that most comrades are not conscious of this is another matter). Thus the de facto goal is not revolutionary regroupment around a program of socialism from below and implacable hostility to all all bureaucracies. Instead, IS regroupment represents a softening in the direction of the very opposite current already rampant within the IS.

In addition, the IS regroupment strategy represents a sad case of running-for-cover. The organization is now in a state of utter despair. It is, *admittedly*, so politically diverse, and the centrifugal forces are so powerful, that the IS has lost all cohesion. Despite its rhetoric, the IS seeks in reality to lose itself politically within the "movement".

We, for our part, see the need to aggressively pursue a regroupment strategy. As the New Left organizations move steadily in reformist directions, and as Maoist ideology increasingly loses its credibility, we see emerging from these movements smaller strata which will move *toward* revolutionary socialism. It is such strata, as well as existing organizations, which we see as the basis for revolutionary regroupment through a process of common work, including common publications.

We start here from two simple premises. *First*, that only the self-activity and self-organization and self-consciousness of the working class can provide the power to overthrow capitalism and, at the same time, provide the social and material basis for constructing a socialist society. *Secondly*, we see the need for a coherent revolutionary socialist organization, not just in a revolutionary period, but even in the present one. Almost the entire Left is experiencing the powerful pull of reformism. This pull manifests itself both within the organizations (for example, NAM and the IS), and through the pressure of reformism upon individual radicals in the mass movements. Resistance to reformism in both arenas can only be successful if it is organized and politically coherent.

It is *because* the IS is in the process of abandoning these two conceptions (despite its residual rhetoric), and *because* the IS is in the demoralized process of dissolution, that we believe the illness of the IS is a fatal one. That is why we believe that even revolutionary regroupment can best be carried on outside the IS, and why we have now decided to separate ourselves from the IS.

At the same time, we want this separation to avoid the bitterness of unnecessary factional struggle. Despite our differences on TDU work, we will avoid any sectarian conduct which might endanger the success of that organization, and we hope the IS will, in turn, respond to us in TDU in a comradely way. Here, as with respect to other elements of the Left, we will be guided by the policy of united fronts, a policy which in the long run will play an indispensable role in the revolutionary socialist regroupment which is so desperately needed in the US.

Rank and File Caucus of the International Socialists

June 1979