

## **Report Motivating The New Constitution**

**By John K for the Constitutional Commission**

Socialist Resurgence emerged from a fight in an overly top-down organization. As we can ascertain from situations in other revolutionary organizations, top-down functioning isn't unique to Socialist Action. Accounts from comrades who have been in Socialist Alternative and the International Socialist Organization tell us similar stories.

How did this sort of functioning become commonplace? Does this mean that the Leninist party model is washed up? How do we balance unity in action and democratic functioning? How do we deal with differences on political issues? How do we build and renew a collective leadership?

In part, I think this sort of top-down behavior flows from decades of retreat of the working-class movement and the desire to preserve the nucleus of a revolutionary party. That said, rigidity and dogmatism run counter to the needs of a revolutionary organization. An overly rigid organization cannot hope to have the creativity and initiative necessary to take advantage of a mass upsurge.

Our tradition has always stressed the clarification of political ideas over organizational measures against political minorities. In SA, our faction emphasized the political questions over organizational ones. There was an unfortunate tendency in SA to see differences as a threat to the party and this led to a style of debate that can be poisonous. This is a style of debate and thinking that was inherited to some degree from the SWP.

Our movement has made some assertions over the decades. First, that a revolutionary situation cannot be resolved in favor of the working class without a revolutionary party and, second, that a party cannot be improvised during a revolutionary situation, it must be consciously and patiently built. Thirdly, that an international organization is necessary -- the struggle is international. We need an international organization.

**In my opinion these remain valid and these ideas inform our considerations.**

We should thoroughly examine the experiences of past revolutionary parties and movements to generalize some lessons. Of these, the Russian revolution and the experience of the Bolsheviks deserves some reflection. How did the Bolsheviks, who by all accounts were a democratic organization *where debate was commonplace*, degenerate into the Stalinized Soviet CP? What role did the post-revolution civil war

play? How do we build an organization that looks more like the party that *made* the revolution than the party it became later?

The early socialist movement was based on all-inclusive organizations where revolutionaries and reformists existed side by side. The all-inclusive nature of the mass socialist parties was not the *cause* of the opportunism that took hold in the ranks of these parties but the co-existence of revolutionary and non-revolutionary thought in a common organization traps revolutionists in a framework where their ideas are necessarily diluted and held back by the majority.

“Against the collective power of the propertied classes the working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all the old parties formed by the propertied classes.

“This constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to insure the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate end -- the abolition of classes.” **from a resolution of the Hague conference of the International Workingmen’s Association**

The concept of the revolutionary party has been repeatedly distorted over the years. The degeneration of the Russian Revolution was due to material conditions - civil war, imperialist invasion, underdevelopment, and the decimation of the ranks of the party in that civil war all led to the bureaucratization of the party. The 10th Congress ban on factions, conceived as a temporary ban, was a huge error. These errors were imported into the Communist International.

The Trotskyist movement broke with Stalinism, but, unfortunately, too often, we still see instances of top-down functioning and bureaucratic organization. The old SWP emerged intact from a period of downturn and anti-communist witch hunt at the beginnings of the 1960s upsurge. The party had always had a reputation for a lively internal life and lively leadership bodies. At the beginning of the 1960s youth radicalization, the Party suffered a couple of debilitating splits which resulted in the tightening of the party’s norms through the 1965 organizational resolution. Cannon argued against this in the pamphlet, [“Don’t Strangle the Party.”](#)

“Not the least of our reasons for remaining alive for thirty-eight years, and growing a little, and now being in a position to capitalize on new opportunities, was the flexible democracy of our party. We never tried to settle differences of opinion by suppression. Free discussion - not every day in the week but at stated regular times, with full guarantees for the minority - is a necessary condition for the health and strength of an organization such as ours.”

Our purpose here is not to throw away the past. We reaffirm the continuity of Trotskyism and Bolshevism but want to look back at how the Bolsheviks actually functioned. How they built a party with roots in the working class and with the flexibility and audacity to overthrow a dictatorship and build workers power.

**Cannon wrote:**

“The Leninist theory of the vanguard party is based on two factors: the heterogeneity of the working class and the exceptionally conscious character of the movement for socialism. The revolutionizing of the proletariat and oppressed people in general is a complex, prolonged, and contradictory affair. Under class society and capitalism, the toilers are stratified and divided in many ways; they live under very dissimilar conditions and are at disparate stages of economic and political development. Their culture is inadequate and their outlook narrow. Consequently they do not and cannot all at once, *en masse* and to the same degree, arrive at a clear and comprehensive understanding of their real position in society or the political course they must follow to end the evils they suffer from and make their way to a better system. Still less can they learn quickly and easily how to act most effectively to protect and promote their class interests.

“This irregular self-determination of the class as a whole is the primary cause for a vanguard party. It has to be constituted by those elements of the class and their spokesmen who grasp the requirements for revolutionary action and proceed to their implementation sooner than the bulk of the proletariat on both a national and international scale. Here also is the basic reason that the vanguard always begins as a minority of its class, a “splinter group”. The earliest formations of advanced workers committed to socialism, and their intellectual associates propagating its views, must first organise themselves around a definite body of scientific doctrine, class tradition, and experience, and work out a correct political program in order then to organise and lead the big battalions of revolutionary forces.

“The vanguard party should aim at all times to reach, move, and win the broadest masses. Yet, beginning with Lenin’s Bolsheviks, no such party has

ever started out with the backing of the majority of the class and as its recognized head. It originates, as a rule, as a group of propagandists concerned with the elaboration and dissemination of ideas. It trains, teaches, and tempers cadres around that program and outlook which they take to the masses for consideration, adoption, action, and verification.

“The size and influence of their organization is never a matter of indifference to serious revolutionists. Nonetheless, *quantitative* indices alone cannot be taken as the decisive determinants for judging the real nature of a revolutionary grouping. More fundamental are such qualitative features as the program and relationship with the class whose interests it formulates, represents, and fights for.” [The Revolutionary Party](#)

We want to learn both the positive and negative lessons of the old SWP and of Socialist Action.

We need a balance sheet of SA. We are building a new organization but we can be proud of the many things we accomplished in our old organization -- defense of the Greyhound Strike in the early 80s, defense of the P-9 meatpackers in Austin Minnesota, our defense of death row prisoners, including Mumia Abu-Jamal, and our opposition to imperialist wars.

One of the lessons the constitutional commission drew from the fight in SA was that the SA constitution was overly vague, which led to confusion and enabled the suppression of our views. Many norms were unwritten and based on a past practice but not spelled out. The old SA constitution was structured to insulate the leadership bodies from the ranks. The stated division of labor between the NC and PC in the old constitution -where the PC was supposed to answer to the NC, but the reality was quite different, was a lesson as well. We want to foster new styles of debate and encourage membership initiative.

The new interim constitution, which we conceive as a living document and not fixed in stone, is no guarantee of better, or more transparent, functioning. The only guarantee of accountability and transparency is an active, educated, and engaged membership. We recognize that we may not get things right the first time. Norms by themselves are not enough without comrades committed to building a democratic organization and strong membership.

Cannon wrote in 1931,

"The Communist League did not begin by stressing organization forms and could not do so. Its primary engagement was to clarify in a broad discussion the great questions brought to the fore in the struggle of the International Left Opposition, and to popularize them in the Communist ranks. To have imposed rigid organization features in the first instance would have been to put the cart before the horse. Form cannot take the place of substance: it can only represent it." [Bolshevik Organization](#)

In constructing this constitution, we have tried to find different methods from the old organizational set up. Our thinking is that this constitution is designed to activate and energize the ranks. Instead of a situation where power in the organization was increasingly centered in one person, we seek to build a collective leadership and to develop a broad secondary leadership that will be able to step forward and lead in the future.

If there is any one failure of the ossified leadership of SA, the lack of emphasis on building this sort of secondary leadership is perhaps the most egregious. I was struck when reading Cannon's *Letters from Prison* that while the leadership of the SWP was sent to prison during WWII that there was a secondary leadership layer capable of stepping up and leading the party. It was clear to me that if SA's leadership were locked up, the organization would shipwreck.

An organization that is overly top-down and afraid to debate politics will prove too static and conservative to intervene in a mass upsurge or revolutionary situation effectively. We need to proceed based on clear political principles but with enough organizational flexibility to bring in new forces and people and give them the opportunity to play a real role in our organization.

Communication technology presents us with challenges as well. The different social media platforms allow us to disseminate our ideas, but we must ask how we conceive of discipline in a revolutionary organization in this new situation.

We hesitate to make predictions- Marxism isn't a crystal ball -- but there is great potential for a mass upsurge of workers and oppressed people in the US. Already we see the power of mass action in the semi-colonial world and in France. The renewed interest in Marxism among youth, the uptick in youth activism around climate and other issues, and the increased combativity of some sections of the working class gives us some room for optimism.

Moving forward, we need to learn the lessons of the past -- from the Bolsheviks, from the SWP, and from SA and other political currents -- without being bound to these traditions by dogma.

We are not “the” party but see the need to build an organization capable of fighting here and now while laying the foundations for that party. We want to build a party more like the Bolshevik party that made the Russian Revolution than the distorted and stunted versions that purport to be that sort of party. The Bolsheviks built a party rooted in the working class and based on open debates -- sometimes publishing different views publicly.

In her essay “Lenin Versus Leninism”, Sandra Bloodworth writes about the “Bolsheviks’ attitudes to democracy, the rights of minorities, the relationship of local committees and organizations and rules. With revolution on the agenda, it was necessary to break out of the habits of the illegal circles where it was virtually impossible to have more than a modicum of democracy. Now Lenin insisted on democracy in the party to the extent that the illegal conditions they still worked in would permit. He was for the election of committees wherever possible; he supported the rights of minorities to form factions at any time. He was for their leaders being included in leadership bodies. In order to remove obstacles for the minority who Lenin had hoped would attend the Congress but didn’t, ‘the Third Congress took every measure to enable the Minority to work with the Majority in one party.’ Minorities were guaranteed the ‘unconditional right’ to carry on an ideological struggle, to publish their views and have them distributed by the party. And local rules guaranteeing the autonomy of local committees were strengthened, removing the right of the Central Committee to remove members from them...”

### **Highlights of the constitution**

From *Membership rights and responsibilities*

“Members have the right and a responsibility to play an active role in the organization, including in its decision-making processes through the various bodies the organization established for this purpose.

“We strive for the fullest possible participation of our membership in our discussions and decision-making process, followed by the greatest possible unity-in-action afterwards. This doesn’t mean unity-in-thought or the obligation to say things one does not agree

with, but it does mean a commitment not to speak in public against or to undermine an agreed upon SR project.”

In keeping with the experience we have coming out of SA, the constitution provides a more clear process for dealing with dues and removing a comrade for non-payment of dues.

The constitution also gives some flexibility on leadership selection -- allowing for either a nominations commission or for the selection of leadership based on nominations from the floor.

The constitution also allows for open conventions that include all members in good standing or a delegated convention. As we grow, we may find that a delegated convention is more efficient.

The draft also lays out disciplinary processes more clearly, separates the Control Commission from the National Committee, giving it more independence and lays out the rights of the oppressed in the organization.

The constitution strives for more accountability and transparency and requires regular reporting to the ranks. The constitution also requires publishing documents of debates.

quote:

“No member shall be subject to sanctions inside the organization for the orderly expression of opinion or the exercise of any other right laid down in the constitution.”

The draft does not include a Political Committee in addition to the National Committee. The NC will meet more frequently, with rotating NC organizers who are subject to recall. In SA, the Political Committee was supposed to answer to the NC, the reality was that the PC tightly controlled the organization. Additionally, there will be quarterly membership meetings prepared by the NC and with decision making power.

In SA, as the factional situation worsened, the National Committee was sidelined and not regularly informed of the decisions of the PC. The ranks of the organization had little idea what the PC or any other leadership body was doing.

What is the role of leadership? To keep the organization in motion while arming the membership politically by organizing discussions on theory and perspectives. This way, we can draw balance sheets and learn the lessons from actions and positions we take.

Above all, we want to develop a secondary leadership as Cannon said by “training and testing” cadres in action.

We are striving for the greatest possible participation of members in areas where there is no branch.

Quote:

“Members who join, but do not live in an area where there is a local branch will be asked to join to the nearest branch, as specified by the NC. They will pay their national dues and sustainer to this branch. They may use other funds for the effort to build a new branch in their area of residence.

“Members of a branch, who live in another geographic area that precludes actual participation in the branch's political activity, will have a voice and vote on national and international reports to the branch. They may cast consultative votes on their branch's local activity. Similarly, branch members resident in the main center will hear area reports from those living afar, but only cast consultative votes on them. The National Committee and branches will work together to maximize opportunities for all members to participate in organizational tasks and activities. Branches shall set up video links for the participation of members in other geographic locations.”

### **What are the next steps?**

We must continue to learn from our experiences, draw lessons and takes the steps that will enable us to one day build a party worthy of the name.

Our formula has to be recruitment and regroupment. We can't build the revolutionary organization we urgently need through one-to-one recruitment alone. We must seek the principled unity of those revolutionaries that can be unified in action. Our method is the united front but our goal is the construction of a Bolshevik party in the US and internationally.

We are asking comrades to ratify the interim constitution.

Additionally, we are asking comrades to pass a motion to retain the constitutional commission and to allow the incoming NC to configure that commission.

Our purpose is to help the organization learn and improve our organizational practices.

The commission will distribute and expand a bibliography of organizational questions and the commission will produce a document on *Revolutionary Socialist Organization Today* for the next pre-convention discussion.