

Reconsidering Party-Building Paradigms

by Steve Bloom

One of the key questions we need to discuss in the lead up to our conference next summer, and at the conference itself, is: How do we assess the SWP's party-building paradigm in light of its degeneration and our subsequent experience? Was there anything in the basic self-conception that contributed significantly to the demise of the party? Also: have there been any changes in the world in the last 2-3 decades that might make us reconsider what we did back then as a model for building a Leninist organization today? (Do we want to still build a Leninist organization today?)

This contribution will not try to provide a comprehensive answer to these questions. I will, however, suggest two key problems, and one conclusion:

* Problem 1: Even in the best days of the party, the idea that we had the correct program (the one and only correct program) to which all genuine revolutionaries would naturally be attracted, was extremely one-sided (note, not wrong in and of itself, but extremely one-sided). The failure to adequately grasp and apply the other side of an essential dialectic contributed significantly to the decline of the party.

* Problem 2: Today there is even less basis for such an approach. "The program" has become much more difficult to define since the fall of the Berlin Wall. In particular, there is little organic attraction for young people today to the Russian revolution as a model, the way there was for the generation of the 1960s (and, arguably, even into the 1980s).

III. Conclusion first

Before developing these two points. I am going to let you read my conclusion. I think it will indicate why these two aspects of the problem seem so important to me:

I will assert that there are, today, genuine revolutionaries scattered in ten to twenty organizations on the US left, maybe more. Most of these organizations have between 50 and 300 active members (the one exception being the ISO). There are also many unaffiliated individuals who can rightly be called revolutionaries. Each of these organizations, even each of the unaffiliated individuals, understands one or more element of a genuine revolutionary truth (which is why the organizations have attracted genuine revolutionaries to their ranks). They also carry along with them considerable baggage that will ultimately need to be discarded. The problem for each of the groups, and (even more importantly) for all of the revolutionaries taken together, is to sort through what is genuine revolutionary truth and what is baggage. No single organization has the answer to that question.

The paradigm today, for most of these groups, remains what we tend to think of as the traditional "Leninist model" (though it is not, I think, a model that Lenin ever actually followed). Each small collective believes that it's truth, and its cadre, are the most important element in the revolutionary equation. All discussions take place first within the group, and among this self-selected cadre. Only after that process has already happened is a broader discussion allowed to develop with members of other organizations or unaffiliated radicals..

There is a thought-through theoretical justification for functioning in this way. It is based on the assumption mentioned above, that the active cadre of any particular group embodies the historical continuity of all those revolutionary principles that remain essential. If any correction to the revolutionary truth personified in this cadre is needed, the engagement of their organization with the real political world will demonstrate this and a correction can be made.

This is not a bad theory, and from the point of view of pure logic it is unassailable. It ought to work the way it is designed to work. The problem, however, is that it doesn't actually do so. I would argue that if we dig just a bit deeper we can understand why. It is, on its face, clearly impossible for groups of 50-300, in a country the size of the USA, to be engaged in enough places, get enough feed-back from the real world, for the process of interaction and self-correction to work as theory suggests that it should. There is a strong tendency to be engaged primarily in areas that will simply reinforce the group's orthodoxies rather than challenge them. Further, on those occasions when challenges are felt, it's far too easy for a group of like-minded individuals, talking primarily to each other, to pretend the challenge is not really there, or does not have sufficient importance to affect the way their group views the world.

In such a process the one-sidedness of each organization, its attachment to baggage that is being carried along with its revolutionary truth, tends to be consistently reinforced. I would argue that the same dynamic holds, unless we are particularly careful to counteract it, even for groups that number in the thousands (which accounts for many of the problems that developed in the SWP and also makes clear why the ISO is also not a potential solution as things presently stand.)

So I would like to suggest that today it is only through a process of cross-fertilized discussion involving at least several different organizations, combined with a collective experience with reality that is far broader than what any one of our individual groups can expect to develop on its own, that "the correct program" for an American socialist revolution can be expected to emerge.

This is why I favor a regroupment perspective for party-building at the present time. Note: We are not talking about a process of forced organizational unification which cannot be supported by a substantial level of common thought and activity. Those who point to the fact that we do not, today, have sufficient common thought or activity to support an active merger of organizations are quite correct. Rather, the word "regroupment" in this context means actively pursuing a process of common thought and activity with revolutionaries from other organizations *in order to create the conditions* which are needed to make unifications possible at some point in the future

What we need *immediately* is an active effort to break out of our small discussion and action circles, develop links across organizations—including in particular unaffiliated revolutionary activists. A dialogue needs to begin at the rank and file level, not simply between "leaders" (because leaders, who have responsibilities to hold organizations together, can be the most conservative when the need is for a process of cross-fertilization). And it seems to me that common action projects *should* be possible in key areas of the class struggle in the USA, such as the antiwar movement, Gulf-Coast solidarity work, immigrant rights work, independent electoral politics, etc. Of course not every group will be prepared to engage in every action project. But, as much as possible,

we need to find affinities and engage in strategy discussions that cut across the present organizational boundaries.

Instead of this, however, the goal of each organization that actually exists at the present time continues to be *primarily* guarding its borders against intrusion, maintaining its own orthodoxies against erosion. Steps that do take place toward cross-fertilization are hesitant, and extremely partial. That mentality has to change. Each group should see it as a victory if the boundaries between organizations become fuzzier and ultimately dissolve—not because any of us have given up our essential orthodoxies, but because we are striving to learn, through a process broader than ourselves, which of our orthodoxies are, indeed, essential, and which are simply baggage carried over from previous stages of our revolutionary existence.

Joaquin Bustelo said to me once that in our SWP days we were never building a party; we were building a faction. I think that is correct. Today most revolutionaries in the USA are still building factions, for the most part in the name of building parties (though in the case of Solidarity, the group I belong to, in the name of rejecting party-building until there is a sufficient mass base to support a party-building project). The faction-building approach has to come to an end. We need a broader collective process in which *all* the revolutionaries in the USA—or at least an overwhelming majority of them—can begin discussing with each other and relating to each other as comrades. Then, and only then, can we talk about party-building in any meaningful sense of that term.

In the best days of the SWP “regroupment” was acknowledged as a legitimate tactical option for building a party when the world at large created the necessary convergence between organizations. This is not, however, the sense in which I use the term here. It describes, instead, a strategic stage of the party-building process in the USA (or, perhaps—making a concession to what is correct in Solidarity’s orientation—a “party-preparation” process), dictated by the present extreme dispersal of revolutionary cadre, with no single organization that is able to act as a pole of attraction to overcome that dispersal.

To repeat: we are not, therefore, talking about an *organizational* proposal for any two or more specific groups to merge with each other. I cannot think of any two organizations on the US left today who could, conceivably, regroup based on the political realities that currently exist. We are proposing a political orientation, an effort to create the conditions—based on a process of common discussion and joint political work—where those who are, today, members of different organizations can reasonably begin to think about unification of their forces at some point in the future.

I. A serious flaw in the SWP party-building model

SWP party-building was centered around developing a correct programmatic understanding of the world. As our program demonstrated its validity in practice, or so the theory went, all (at least the overwhelming majority of) genuine revolutionaries would be attracted to it, and therefore to the party. The same process would sort between genuine revolutionaries and pretenders inside the party itself. Genuine revolutionaries would become more and more homogeneous around their understanding of and commitment to “the program.” Pretenders would balk at one aspect or another, and this would become the basis for splits.

Such an approach severely misunderstands the dialectic of how a revolutionary program emerges.

A) There can (and often will) be more than one possible (reasonable) pathway toward the goal of socialist revolution in any particular country at any particular time. It simply isn't true, for example, that anyone who will not make "the turn to industry" at the moment the party leadership declares this to be an essential programmatic element, is thenceforth and forever doomed to sit on the revolutionary sidelines. "The turn" is an obvious illustration, but it is just that—an illustration. We could cite others (such as the debate in the mid 1960s about whether the YSA should work to build the SMC or intervene in SDS, as if there was a "right" and "wrong" choice to be made here).

There are occasional moments where decisive turning points of the class struggle must be recognized (for example, the revolutionary reality of the Soviets in Russia in 1917). But most of the time the idea of one, and only one "correct program" is a distortion of how revolutionary thought and action actually relate to the world at large.

What we can say is that every successful pathway that leads in a revolutionary direction will share certain key features: attempting to promote an insurrectionary upsurge of the working class, alliance-building between the working class and other social layers that have an interest in overthrowing capitalism, the development of a leadership capable of charting a road to power, etc. But the specifics of how these general features will manifest themselves in any given social reality come with a host of variables, including the variable of where revolutionaries choose to devote their energies at any given moment. It is not always necessary for that choice to be "correct" (in the sense of optimal) in order for it to be adequate. To make a revolution, I would suggest, we only have to develop an adequate "program" in this sense (which is a good thing. Our choices cannot possibly, after all, be optimal 100 percent of the time.) And all revolutionaries do not have to march in lock-step behind a single program.

I certainly don't want to belittle conversations about what strategic choice would be best at any given moment (assuming there is such a "best" choice, and not merely alternative pathways which cannot be considered more or less optimal than one another). I do believe in having such discussions. But it is quite wrong to act as if anyone who might favor a choice that is different from mine is unworthy of the name "revolutionary," and should therefore be excluded from my revolutionary party. Yet that is the level of "programmatic homogeneity" that the SWP strove to develop.

B) Even when there might be clearly correct choices, and clearly incorrect choices, "the program" (that is, the set of correct choices for today) threatens to become outdated almost as soon as it is drafted. Reality changes constantly. The law that human consciousness lags behind changes in reality applies with equal force to revolutionaries as it does to others. So while we need to develop our program, and act with confidence based on its conclusions, we also have to know (and this is an iron law) that some of our conclusions will be wrong. Even those which are correct today may be superseded tomorrow by events we have not foreseen (cannot possibly foresee).

Thus we need to reject the style of "programmatic definition" engaged in by the SWP over most of its lifetime, which conceived of "the program" as a set of building blocks, one resting upon the other and essentially immutable once put in their proper

place. A more appropriate metaphor would be a mosaic, of tiles whose colors and relationships to one another are constantly changing, at least in subtle ways and sometimes significantly. (Whichever metaphor we embrace, of course, there is still a need to reject the effort initiated by Jack Barnes's to bulldoze the wall, or smash the mosaic entirely.) The party needs to be engaged in a constant process of discussion internally, with others on the left, and (most importantly) with any mass movements for social change in order to define (and then constantly redefine) an adequate program in the sense indicated above. Yet the SWP lacked all three of these elements, at least from the time I joined in 1968.

There was little possibility for a genuine dialogue within the party. It was established a priori that the party's program was correct (in the building-block sense indicated above). Agreeing with this idea was a prerequisite for joining in the first place. The task was for all members (at least, all those who wanted to remain part of the revolutionary club) to become more homogeneous around this, already defined, "correct program." Anyone who even raised a question was instantly branded as one of the pretenders, balking at some aspect of "the correct program" and therefore *already* engaged in split behavior (simply for raising a question!).

All other groups on the left were denounced as "opponents" who could, almost by definition, have no idea that was worth considering if it was not already the same as our own idea. And our relationship to the mass movement was strictly interventionist (instrumentalist). We knew what was right for the movement because we had the correct program for revolution in the USA. An actual dialogue with the movement itself, and with its activist layer, was considered unnecessary.

If we want to sum up this problem in a word, that word would be "arrogance." Party leaders had an arrogant relationship to the rank and file. The party as a whole had an arrogant relationship to the mass movement and the world at large. Everything was measured by how it conformed to our program, as understood and interpreted by the party leadership. Our program was never measured, not to mention re-measured, based on how it conformed to a constantly changing reality.

Again, in correcting this error we should not fall into the opposite error (as many do). We are, quite correctly, conservative about any and all programmatic conclusions that have passed the test of historical experience. We do not discard them lightly. But we also need to be aware that just because our experience has told us something is universally true (that is, because it has always been true in our experience) the next experience might be the one which forces us to change that conclusion. And each new experience will, *inevitably*, open up new truths, in new areas, not previously addressed by "our program." If we maintain our awareness of this dialectic we will become capable of avoiding the arrogance which helped to destroy the SWP.

II. Attracting young people to Leninism, Trotskyism, Marxism, today

When a revolutionary generation of the 1960s and early '70s was coming of age, the organic attraction of Marxism was extremely strong. The Russian revolution was acknowledged as a seminal turning point in world history—by both its supporters and its opponents. Within our lifetimes revolutions took place in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, led by forces that embraced Marxism (at least in name). In the anticolonial revolution, socialist (again, at least nominally Marxist) forces were actively contesting with

bourgeois nationalist elements for hegemony (whether they knew it or not). There had been insurrectionary and semi-insurrectionary upsurges with strong working-class components in Latin America and Europe. Trotsky's concept of permanent revolution, combined with a Leninist understanding of the role played by leadership, best explained the successes and failures in all of these processes. So Marxism, at its analytical best (and we did find it at its analytical best through the SWP and the Fourth International) was able to explain what was happening around us, help us to make sense of the world and to orient ourselves in the context of genuinely revolutionary possibilities.

The situation today (at least up until recent developments in Venezuela) is totally different. The last major attempts at socialist revolution took place in 1979 (Nicaragua and Grenada). That is almost 3 decades ago. Young people who become attracted to radical politics in the 21st century relate to these revolutions in the same way our generation related to the upsurge that forged the CIO. In other words, they see it as ancient history. And unlike the upsurge that forged the CIO, Nicaragua and Grenada ended in defeats. Starting with the Iranian revolution, also in 1979, a new and overtly reactionary current, Islamic fundamentalism, began to become a dominant force, virtually uncontested by the secular left, in the leadership of the anti-colonial (anti-imperialist) revolution in the Mid-East and other parts of the world. The Russian revolution ceased to exist as a living reality, became instead a seemingly outdated historical reference. China and Vietnam have essentially embraced a process of integration into the capitalist world market. Major currents that once seemed to embody the possibility of socialist revolution have likewise capitulated to neoliberalism and class collaborationism (ANC in South Africa, PT in Brazil, Republican movement in Ireland).

Yes, Cuba remains, and Venezuela appears on the horizon. But, at least up to now these two countries have not provided a sufficient ideological pull in the USA to counteract the factors mentioned above.

Thus there is no longer the same natural attraction, for radicalizing young people, to a revolutionary Marxist (Trotskyist, Leninist) approach. I personally remain convinced that the overall historical legacy of revolutionary Marxism (Trotskyism, Leninism) remains essential for anyone who wants to make a socialist revolution in the world today. I am also convinced, however, that we will not persuade a new generation in the USA that this is true simply by waving the flag of our past achievements and programmatic conclusions, expecting them to flock to our banner. We do not have sufficient political or social weight to make such a perspective realistic. The fact that our current was correct, historically—in the context of the Soviet Union and the first three post-war decades—counts for very little at the present time in the minds of most newly radicalizing young people. They want explanations and ideas that seem more relevant to what is happening now.

Our primary task, therefore, is to engage actively with the new experiences of a new generation, often through forms that will not be of our own choosing but emerge organically from the efforts of that new generation. We must help the old conclusions (at least those that remain valid) to re-emerge organically from this process. If we fail to engage in the multi-sided and respectful conversation (and process of collective action) that this will require—including many groups and individuals who come from radically different backgrounds than our own and who have, at least in the past, drawn substantially different conclusions—then conscious Trotskyists and Leninists (in the

proper pro-democratic sense of that term) will ultimately render ourselves irrelevant to the development of the next revolutionary generation in the USA. That would be tragic indeed.

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I hope that some readers will now go back and reconsider my conclusion in section III. After thinking about points I and II it might make more sense, or at least make sense in a different way than when you read it initially.