

Comments on “Building the Revolutionary Party”

by Steve Bloom

[These remarks were made on July 27, 2008 at the “Conference on the Legacy of Leon Trotsky and US Trotskyism” held at Fordham University in NYC. The text is reconstructed from notes and edited based on discussion at the conference itself. (There is one footnote explaining how a comment from the floor, and my response to it, was incorporated into these notes.) Of course there are many aspects of party-building not covered here—such as its relationship to the broader class struggle, what critical mass of cadre we need before we can truly call ourselves a “party” (and what organizational forms are appropriate until we reach that critical mass), the social composition we should be striving for, etc. In a limited time I was able to discuss only one aspect that seemed particularly relevant for this conference—SB.]

I would like to start by emphasizing a point made by the chair in introducing this panel. I am a member of Solidarity, but I do not speak here for that organization. I take full personal responsibility for the ideas I am about to present to you. (And I may have to.)

Yesterday the question was posed—by a conference participant who comes from a different tradition, does not share most of our history: “Why are there so many Trotskyist groups when there seems to be so much agreement on fundamental political matters?”

I believe that this is a central question for our historical current, especially when we are talking about “party building.” It’s one we not only need to answer; it’s one we need to do something about.

Those of you who are capable of having a respectful dialogue across tendency lines may chafe at my next assertion. I don’t mean it disrespectfully. I have respect for all those, and there are many, who have participated positively in the course of this conference. Still, we should consider the ways in which the more sectarian forces among us (those who find themselves in a constant war with everyone else, who stand at the mike each time in order to further strengthen the Chinese Wall that separates their group from all others) hold up a mirror in which the rest of us might take a look at ourselves.

True, this is a fun-house mirror. It creates a wild caricature that we can laugh at. But it’s a caricature that exaggerates certain real features of our historical current. In smaller and less sectarian ways most of those who would identify themselves as “Trotskyists” (at least if the question were posed point-blank) have been constructing walls of one kind or another with our ideologies for the last 70-plus years. We mark out a specific political territory. We gather a cadre together inside that territory. And we proceed to defend the territory we have staked out against all those who do not choose to inhabit it with us.

Constructing Walls

Don’t get me wrong; I believe in defining ideological territory. I do not propose to give that up. But the borders we use to define our specific territories (even when we are constructing walls of one kind or another) can be conceived of in different ways.

I have mentioned those who create Chinese walls, or maybe medieval fortresses would be the best metaphor. It’s easy for us to dismiss folks who do that.

But another approach, and this it seems to me has been the dominant one, is to construct more modest houses in which we can live. True, our houses have plenty of windows and doors in the best of cases. But they remain private spaces where we really feel most at home. And they have genuine walls that separate us (the “true revolutionaries” with the “correct program”) from all others.

I want to suggest, however, that we might begin conceiving of our relationship to one another in a different way, thinking perhaps of an office with cubicles where people can stand up and talk over the partitions, easily walk around and visit—or perhaps with movable walls that can be reconfigured depending on changing needs. We could get more radical still and conceive of a garden with waist-high hedges instead of walls. (I’m not going to apologize for the extended metaphor. It’s the risk you take when you ask a poet to speak on party-building.)

Responding to the question about why there are so many groups, Robin David, in his summary remarks on the panel yesterday, suggested that our fragmentation was a reflection of the pressures from Stalinism on a small and isolated political current. That’s certainly one element. But if what Robin says is true then we need to think through the consequences for today. Stalinism no longer exists in the same way it did back then—as a dominant current that defines almost everything about the left and about radical politics. Whatever our assess-

ment may be concerning the necessity, in the past, of building the kinds of houses we did for ourselves, we should now be able to refocus our approach, do better than we have in the past.

But we aren't doing better. I want to use two illustrations from our discussions this weekend to illustrate the point.

- The ISO and Solidarity have similar takes on the Green Party and its relationship to Independent Political Action. We also have similar takes on what the Obama phenomenon represents and how to relate to it in a positive way, how important it is to address those supporting Obama in a pedagogical fashion that respects the healthy side of their response to his campaign. And both groups, in that context, discussed how we should relate to the presidential efforts of Cynthia McKinney and Ralph Nader. But neither group thought to ask the other what it was thinking. We were satisfied to just go ahead and consider the problem on our own. Further, if we *had* thought to open a dialogue with one another we had no established mechanism for doing so. We were stuck behind the walls we, ourselves, have created between organizations. Why should this be?

We were sitting in our own houses, looking out different windows which saw different pieces of the landscape unfolding outside, and came to different conclusions after having the same discussion. Of course, there's no guarantee that had we talked to each other about Nader/McKinney/Obama our conclusions would have turned out differently. There are more factors at work here than simply which windows we were looking out of. But it's absolutely certain that if we never talk across the organizational divides we have set up then we will have no possibility whatsoever to influence each other. And I tend to think, optimistically, that even if, in the end, we still found ourselves drawing the same political conclusions we did in this case, we would, at least, have each developed a better understanding of our own orientations.

- Second example: The comrades here from the Freedom Socialist Party have explained their theory of "revolutionary integrationism," why, in their judgment, this is so important for understanding how to make a revolution in the USA. There is, of course, nothing wrong with their doing this, even though personally I strongly disagree with their theory. I respect their right to hold the theory and try to convince the rest of us. I certainly appreciate the respectful way in which they participate in our conversations.

But a problem arises when the FSP acts as if accepting their theory of revolutionary integrationism is a

prerequisite for building a revolutionary party in this country. The comrades will probably tell us that while they are convinced of this programmatic truth, and while they are building their own party at the present moment based upon it, they would also be happy to co-exist in a common revolutionary organization with those who have other theories should such an organization ever come into existence. It's just not happening today so they are building *their* party based on *their* theory.* But that's not good enough in my view. If every group proceeds based on this approach then it is, simply, impossible for the broader revolutionary organization we need to ever come into existence. Everyone will be waiting for someone else to set it up.

I have heard members of the FSP speak on numerous occasions to defend their view on revolutionary integrationism, explain how this must be the programmatic basis for socialist revolution in the USA. I cannot once recall hearing them get up to say "this is only our view, of course, and we would really, really like to be part of a broader revolutionary organization in which there are other views, even if ours turns out to be in a minority." And yet that's what they need to say, at least as often as they defend their own ideological perspective. We all do. And we need to act as if we mean what we say, that we're not just saying it to establish a verbal record.

I don't mean to pick on the FSP in particular here. They are no worse than most Trotskyist groups in this respect, and they're better than many. It's just that the question of "revolutionary integrationism" happens to have come up in our discussions this weekend.

Faction and Party

The bottom line of my thesis, then, is that it's OK to have and define specific ideological borders between currents and tendencies in the Trotskyist movement. It's not OK when those borders become the basis for building separate revolutionary organizations in the long term. Building separate revolutionary organizations in the long term on such a narrow basis cuts off cross-fertilization and tends to reinforce each group in its own weaknesses. It also becomes impossible for our current, as a collective whole, to influence contemporary discussions on the broader left in the way that we should.

For too many years, in the name of "party-building," we have been creating organizations with a level of political homogeneity that, I would say, is actually appropriate for a current, a tendency, a faction, rather than for a political party. I assert that this was true even of the SWP in its healthiest days. We can dis-

cuss whether that reflected some historical necessity—a result of Stalinism or whatever. I’m willing to accept such a thesis in part, though I still think the SWP leadership often exaggerated what was actually necessary, and that this exaggeration contributed significantly to many of the specific organizational distortions we have noted in previous discussions this weekend. It was one of the reasons why virtually every significant political disagreement after 1940 led to a split, despite our organizational theory that every significant political disagreement *should not* result in a split.

Whatever we may think about this history, however, we need to break from our old habits and try to do better today, when we are not confronted by the same social pressures.

Regroupment

Please note the difference between the approach I am presenting here—which I have referred to on our preconference list serve (and also in other milieus) as a “regroupment perspective”—and the traditional conception of regroupment. Classically, we think about regroupment when a particular political conjuncture breaks down the walls between organizations, makes one or more of them rethink its core ideology in a way that allows two or more to come together. This does happen from time to time, and it’s an important process. But it’s not the process I’m talking about here.

I’m talking about a potential for regroupment that reconsiders the nature of the ideological walls we construct in the first place. We should not ask anyone to give up their ideas. In fact, the approach I suggest is dependent on a clear definition and understanding of the ideological barriers that separate specific currents. That’s the first step in learning how to build a collaborative relationship with each other, in a common political organization, even as these disagreements continue to exist. The disagreements matter. They should not, however, be decisive.

I want to cite one historical example that I think folks in this room will probably recognize, in an effort to illustrate my point: the ideological and organizational relationship between Lenin and Trotsky from 1905 to 1917. I don’t think any of us today would assert that the ideological differences that existed between these two leaders actually justified their remaining in separate organizations. Yet not one of the differences we have among ourselves at the present time rises to the level of importance, strategically, as the actual political disagreements between Lenin and Trotsky from 1905 to 1917.

It’s important to note that even though there were, in fact, separate organizations in Russia (especially after the Bolsheviks formed their own party) the walls between organizations were never as impermeable as are the walls we—in the US and international Trotskyist left—have constructed between our different currents. There was always a rich and vibrant discussion taking place among the groups. And there was a conveyor belt that took individual leaders back and forth between left Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, and left Social-Revolutionaries (to name only three organizations). I was struck some years ago while translating the glossary of Ernest Mandel’s notebook on the Russian Revolution for the International Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam how every individual named was a member of three or four different organizations and/or currents-within-organizations over the course of a decade. Such a process would be impossible for the US or international Trotskyist left as we have configured ourselves for the past seventy years and more.

And of course the Bolshevik Party itself was a cauldron of debate, discussion, and disagreement—far less “homogeneous” than the general model our current has set for itself. There’s a lesson here too, it seems to me.

The conception I am suggesting also solves the dilemma that Fred Feldman posed for us in the discussion yesterday: He explained that in the early ‘80s he agreed with Barnes politically on Cuba and permanent revolution, but found himself alienated from the organizational conclusions Barnes was drawing as a result of his new programmatic outlook. Back when I was a leader of the Fourth Internationalist Tendency we always tried to stress, precisely, that the problem in the SWP was not Barnes’s political conclusions per se (though we profoundly disagreed with his political conclusions). It was his attempt to impose those conclusions on the party as a new program without allowing any discussion whatsoever—and his conception of building a party that was in reality a monolithic faction around this set of ideas.

That’s why, despite the fact that I still disagree with Fred about many things, I’m happy that he’s a member of Solidarity and feel perfectly comfortable in the same organization.

Creating the organization we need

Still, I cannot say that Solidarity is the organization we need today. It gets part of what I’m talking about right—the part about developing an ethos where comrades with different ideological perspectives can co-exist in the same revolutionary collective. But most mem-

bers of Solidarity would almost certainly disagree with me about the need to define ideological realities clearly in that context, to maintain affinities along these lines at the same time as we build a common revolutionary organization that is consciously multi-tendency. On that question I feel much more at home here, in the present milieu.

So I cannot hold my own organization up as a model of the kind of group I'm talking about. And I cannot hold up any other. People often ask me: "Steve, where are we going to find the group we need?" And my answer is that we aren't going to find it. No one is going to build it for us. We have to create it for ourselves, out of the groups and unaffiliated cadre that presently exist. A serious start in that direction would be helped along dramatically by a paradigm shift among those of us who are gathered together here in this room: the development of a "party-building" perspective where we begin to accentuate our commonalities and, while continuing to define our disagreements do so in ways that don't make collaboration and collective efforts more difficult. We genuinely have to put the needs of the broader revolutionary collective first, and the need to build our own particular current or tendency within it second.

Something else to note on this before I conclude: There have been a lot of references this weekend to the united front as a useful tool. This is part of the process I'm describing here. It's certainly a good way to start the process. But the challenge I'm posing runs much deeper than simply the creation of two, three, many united fronts. It's a process of rethinking what we mean when we talk about creating (or recreating) a revolutionary party in the USA, how this *must* be a party that does not try to achieve "programmatic homogeneity" in the very narrow sense most Trotskyist groups have generally conceived of in the past. As much as I value the history and contributions of the SWP, as much as I believe there are invaluable lessons contained in that history, I don't actually think we can model our party-of-the-future on that particular party-of-our-collec-

tive-past, which certainly puts me at odds with a good many people in this room.

Finally, by way of conclusion, let me stress that in my view the process I have described among those who continue to identify with the Trotskyist tradition is, in fact, only one part of a broader process. That broader process includes others who are survivors from different political traditions—which, like ours, suffered shipwreck in the late 1970s and early '80s—plus a new generation of radicalizing young people who have no particular reason to identify revolutionary ideas with our historical current. Yes, Trotskyist explanations of the world after the degeneration of the USSR were better than those presented by other currents. But that truth does not carry much weight among newly radicalized youth for whom it's all a discussion of ancient history. And we have no right to expect that it should. We will be judged by how we analyze and orient to contemporary developments, how we contribute to contemporary struggles. If we do this well then, and only then, can we reasonably expect young people to become interested in studying the programmatic and theoretical tools that allow us to make our contribution.

If Trotskyist historical perspectives continue to have theoretical relevance today, and I am among those who believe strongly that they do, then this relevance can and will be rediscovered as a result of new experiences in the struggle for socialism and human liberation. Our task, if we want to remain relevant, is to fuse our historical understanding with the contemporary experience of a new generation, just as the generation of the 1930s had to fuse its understanding with the experience of the '60s generation in order to become relevant to us.

This underlines still further why we cannot continue to be satisfied building houses based on old ideological divisions. Most of the young people who might be recruited to revolutionary Marxism today simply won't be attracted to that approach. They expect something better from us, and we should expect something better from ourselves.

* These two sentences, and my reply to them, were not in the original presentation:

"The comrades will probably tell us that while they are convinced of this programmatic truth, and while they are building their own party at the present moment based upon it, they would also be happy to coexist in a common revolutionary organization with those who have other theories should such an organization ever come into existence. It's just not happening today so they are building *their* party based on *their* theory."

One individual from the FSP did, in fact, say this during the discussion in response to the comments I made about their approach to "revolutionary integrationism." I choose to incorporate a discussion of this into the written version

of my comments, since the FSP comrade's clarification and my reply to it seem important for deepening our collective understanding of the broader question.