

Socialist Organization Today

by Charlie Post and Kit Adam Wainer



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This pamphlet is dedicated to the memories of Steve Zeluck (1922-1985) and Ernest Mandel (1923-1995), whose work on revolutionary socialist organization laid the theoretical foundation for this pamphlet.

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SOCIALISTS TODAY ARE trying to chart their way through unfamiliar terrain. Socialist organizations are weaker now than they have been at any point in the 20th century. At the same time, the unions and many of the movement organizations that we have expected to provide the basis for a working-class and popular challenge to capitalism have declined as well.

The societies to which many on the left looked for examples are no longer of much use either. Most of the “communist” countries have disappeared and the “socialist” governments have become scarcely distinguishable from their conservative opponents. The regimes regarded by some on the left as models of “socialism” have collapsed, demonstrating the impossibility of building a viable post-capitalist economy and society ruled by a privileged, dictatorial bureaucracy. Similarly, the “socialist” parties of western Europe have failed to establish an alternative to both “free market capitalism” and “authoritarian socialism.” Instead, social-democratic governments in France, Italy and Spain have been as brutal in deregulating their economies and dismantling their welfare states as the regimes of Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain or Ronald Reagan in the United States.

In spite of all this there are reasons for socialists to be hopeful. A small, but substantial number of people remain committed to socialist politics and organization. Within the left there has been a great interest in reexamining our pasts. Those who have remained active have been refreshingly willing to take a critical look at the history of the radical movement in order to avoid past mistakes. A larger number have remained committed to radical social change by building the working-class and social movements. Among these are activists in opposition/reform caucuses in the existing unions and in “workers’ centers” among unorganized workers. And, while many of the social movements of the last three decades have declined precipitously, gay, lesbian and bi-sexual liberation activists have made their movement an important focus of struggle since the mid-1980s.

We in Solidarity are committed to building these movements, to participating in the ongoing discussions about the left’s history (both positive and negative), and to maintaining a revolutionary socialist tradition in the United States. The question is how to do that in today’s political climate.

I: The Socialist Left in the 1990s

It is difficult to be socialist today. In a period in which activism is on the wane, the idea of a revolutionary left seems more and more abstract. Not surprisingly, many have given up building socialist

organizations and political activity altogether.

Many others, while remaining active, have lost confidence in the practicality of socialist organization. Recognizing the weakness of the left, these activists believe we need to put off the project of socialist organization—and even refrain from use of the term “socialist”—until some future time in which the balance of forces will have changed. This current views the socialist project as irrelevant, or at least impractical, at present. Today’s task, on the contrary, is to coalesce a more vaguely defined progressive opposition to the “corporations” and “financiers.”

Unfortunately, the revolutionary left has rarely offered serious answers to these critics. For the most part, the few revolutionary organizations that remain merely repeat the claim that they are the nucleus of the vanguard of the working class, and denounce those who deny their leadership credentials. Rather than attempt to analyze the crisis of the left that has disheartened so many socialists—and stripped even the ranks of these “vanguards”—they have acknowledged their shrunken size only to praise their own endurance.

For this trend the central task of revolutionaries is recruiting and training people around a fairly abstract understanding of the workings of capitalism and the necessity of socialist revolution. Refusing to prioritize the long-term reconstruction of activist movements, these organizations have fine-tuned programs that have little meaning for activists beyond their own memberships. In short, they have been guilty of precisely what their critics have associated with socialist politics in general: living in a fantasy world.

The problem is that the “socialism is irrelevant” trend is partially right. The socialist project is far less viable today than at any other point in the 20th century, and not solely because of the collapse of the regimes that many on the left falsely identified with socialism. Movement leaderships—what *we* mean by the term “vanguard”—are small and embattled. For the most part they are not socialist, nor will they join a socialist organization until there is a level of mass struggle that would make the socialist project seem realistic to a large segment of this militant minority. Proclaiming one’s unshakable fealty to revolutionary Marxism will not resolve this problem nor will it prevent anyone else from moving rightward.

We in Solidarity believe in a third course, an alternative to the abandonment of socialism or the sectarian bunker. We are committed to the revitalization of the organizations of social protest. At the same time we remain dedicated to the building of an

effective socialist organization. That requires a willingness to understand how and why times have changed. Specifically, this pamphlet will offer an explanation of how genuine vanguard organizations rose in previous decades and have faded more recently. From there we suggest a course we can take together to help rebuild the movements and a revolutionary left.

II: Key Questions

How do people radicalize?

It's a catch-22, but movements are built by people who are radicalizing and activists radicalize when they absorb lessons from their experiences in movements. More powerful than ideas themselves, activity in struggle teaches the centrality of self-activity and self-organization. In order for workers, women, racial minorities, or gays and lesbians to win struggles, they have to force capitalists and the state to make concessions. In building movements powerful enough to defend past popular gains and win new ones, working and oppressed people have to develop the broadest solidarity, they have to build democratic forms of organization, and they have to take the risks involved in mass, militant action at the workplace or in the streets. People engaged in struggle develop ideas to explain and justify their actions—radical, anti-capitalist ideas. Very simply, the practical experience of strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins and the like is the key to the growth of working-class and popular radicalism.

Different generations have learned this in different ways. Anti-war activists of the 1960s built massive protests and educational campaigns in opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam. As the horror of the Vietnam war stunned a generation, activists mobilized a public outcry against it. They brought thousands of marchers into the streets in national demonstrations, organized local committees, canvassed neighborhoods, occupied universities, shut down induction centers, engaged in various forms of civil disobedience and built grassroots support.

Activity yielded both small and large successes such as an endorsement of a rally by a union or community organization, or a declaration by a new politician of opposition to the war. The mass mobilizations made the war increasingly difficult to prosecute and forced the White House to abandon it by 1973. Yet, few activists could have known what Henry Kissinger revealed years later: President

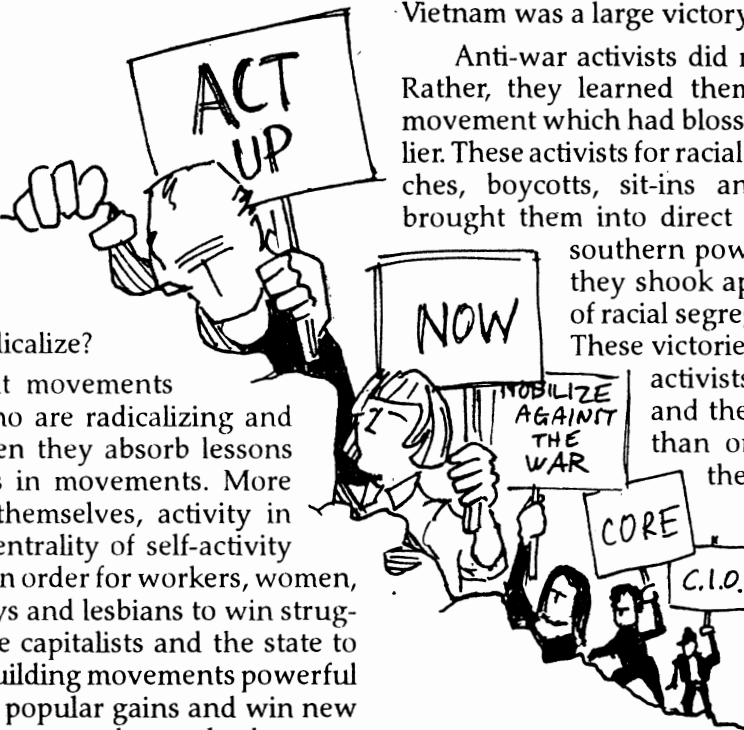
Richard Nixon was contemplating the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam but continuously postponed his decision out of fear of the anti-war movement. The eventual end of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam was a large victory for anti-war activism.

Anti-war activists did not invent these tactics. Rather, they learned them from the civil rights movement which had blossomed only a decade earlier. These activists for racial equality organized marches, boycotts, sit-ins and freedom rides that brought them into direct confrontation with the southern power structure. Gradually, they shook apart important elements of racial segregation in the U.S. South. These victories taught a generation of activists to rely on themselves and their own activities, rather than on the government and the courts.

The women's movement of the early 1970s also produced a layer of activists whose consciousness about gender relations and social change developed through struggle. Many "second wave" feminists were schooled in the anti-war and student mobilizations of the previous decade. They too mobilized themselves, created women's organizations and thereby raised the consciousness of millions.

In recent years, newly radicalized activists have glimpsed what social movements can accomplish. Unfortunately, they have also seen some of the drawbacks of trying to force change in a period in which activism is at a low ebb. The movement against U.S. intervention in Central America in the 1980s radicalized tens of thousands on campuses and in communities throughout the country. Learning from the experiences of anti-war activists from the Vietnam days, organizations such as the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) organized rallies, petition campaigns, educational programs, and material assistance to the victims of the war.

Many of these activists learned the value of self-activity and developed an interest in Marxism, largely because of their contacts with revolutionary organizations in Central America. However, the anti-intervention movement was hindered by a pattern of movement decline and the fact that few U.S. soldiers were placed at risk of injury or death. It never developed the mass strength of the previous anti-war movement, and was not as successful in affecting U.S. foreign policy.



In the 1980s and 1990s gay rights activists have spear-headed the most substantial social movement of recent years. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) has organized marches and civil disobedience to demand government action to fight AIDS. These activists have seen government indifference and challenged it with sit-ins and street blockades. Thousands of activists are learning that their own activity has brought the AIDS epidemic to public attention. Unfortunately, however, they too are bucking a downward trend in all the movements and have had great difficulty winning reforms from government bodies whose budgets are being slashed. As a result, many gay and lesbian activists are quickly "burnt out" by their inability to win concrete gains, while many of those who remain consistently active tend to view their struggles in isolation from those of workers, racial minorities and women.

In the last year, new activists have emerged in the struggles against the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 in California, and in defense of affirmative action and other social gains of the 1960s. We hope that these movements will develop new strategies and organizations that can sustain the radicalism of these activists.

Why Isn't Everybody Radical?

Social movements have generated feminists, anti-racists, anti-interventionists, and gay rights activists. Labor activism has also produced several generations of worker militants. In all cases, a substantial minority has developed an interest in socialism and many have joined socialist organizations. Yet the majority of activists do not become socialists and the majority of people do not become active.

Political consciousness develops unevenly, both within the activist communities and over time. Waves of movement radicalism have schooled generations in self-activity while at their peak, but many of those same activists have withdrawn as their movements have ebbed and returned to the demands of private life. The success movements achieve at their high points often leave a lasting imprint on consciousness. The "Vietnam Syndrome," for example, still had a place in popular parlance at the beginning of the Gulf War. But the reforms they won are in danger once the movements recede.

The activist milieu shrinks as the movement is in decline and only the most committed remain. Again the cruel irony is that when movements are small it is harder to recruit new members and harder to radicalize new activists. When movement organizations lack the power to win immediate gains,

only those with a long-term vision of social change stick around for the fight. In these circumstances, many committed movement activists tend to narrow their political vision in the hope of somehow preserving their organizations and whatever gains they made in the past.

How Do Radicals Organize?

Even in periods of little movement activity, some activists remain radical and some radicals remain active. They keep alive rank-and-file organizations within their unions and lead working-class struggles within communities. They are the backbone of anti-intervention and anti-racist committees. They build women's rights organizations and movements for gay rights. They learn the lessons of their own activity and help younger people understand these lessons when they first come around.

These activists are what Marxists have generally regarded as a "vanguard." While mobilizing others to act they confront every day the limits U.S. capitalism places on what is feasible. They see the intransigence of government administrators who will not fund AIDS research in a period of fiscal austerity. They see the resistance of the new right, whose repressive "pro-family" agenda has come to dominate mainstream politics.

To comprehend *why* their opposition is so great and their gains so tenuous, they need a more sophisticated analysis of how capitalism functions and how it shapes U.S. politics. These activists are the audience for socialist ideas because their long-term commitment to social change encourages them to develop a broader vision of how society works and how it is transformed.

Yet neither their radicalism nor their activity are enough to develop a socialist vision or strategy. Among those schooled in the larger movements of the 1960s, only a small number remain active today. But a substantial portion of those who are still around joined socialist organizations in the 1960s and 1970s. These vanguard activists best connected the knowledge they gained from their own experiences to a broader Marxist understanding of capitalism. Participating in organizations such as the Young Communist League, the Young Socialist Alliance, the International Socialists or one of numerous organizations that emerged from the Maoist left, they combined their own insights with those of activists from other sectors and drew general political conclusions.

Thus, a socialist organization can keep alive the lessons of the past and generalize from them. It allows activists from the labor upsurges of the 1930s

and 1940s to meet militants radicalized in the 1960s or even in the 1980s and 1990s. Together they can put together a more sophisticated picture of how society works and radical movements are built. Its members can more easily connect their activity to their broader vision of how society is changed. A socialist organization educates potential socialists and acts as the "historic memory" of the mass movements.

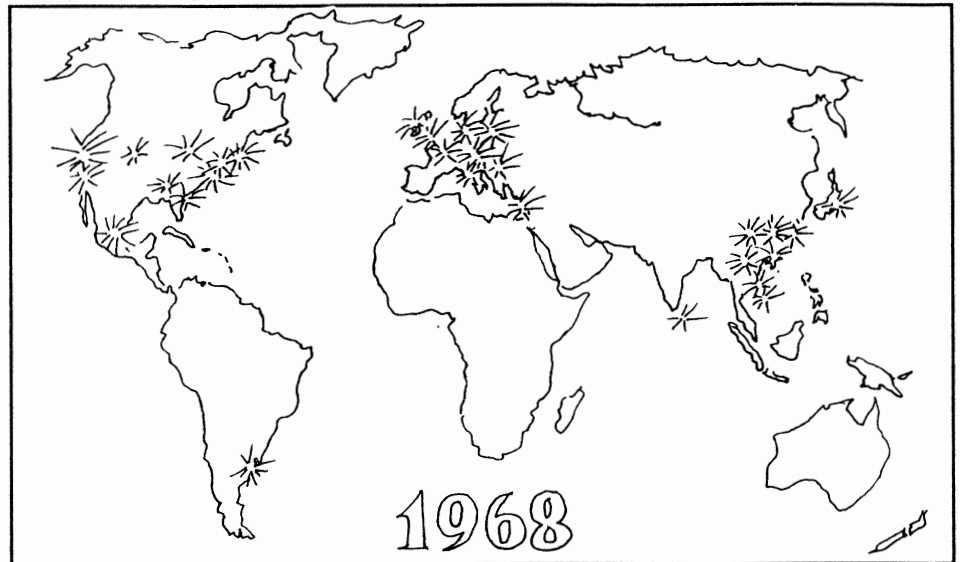
Yet, having said all of that, building a vanguard and a socialist organization is not a matter simply of will. Movements are historical formations, arising when millions of people are willing to shout "no" and then do something about it. Similarly, revolutionary socialist parties that are real "vanguard" organizations arise when a substantial number of militants, in large movement organizations, come together to transcend the potential parochialism of their single-issue groups and develop a more comprehensive strategy for anti-capitalist struggle. To understand how this has happened in the past, and how it will happen again in the future, we need a historical perspective on vanguard organizations.

III. The History of the Workers' Vanguard

We in Solidarity want to build a revolutionary socialist organization that can organize the work of socialists in the labor and social movements, educate its members as revolutionaries and Marxists, and win over new people to revolutionary socialism. However, we have created an organization unlike most on the revolutionary left today. Solidarity members build rank-and-file caucuses in the unions, workers' centers and the independent organizations of women, gays and lesbians, and people of color, even if these activities do not immediately yield recruits to our organization.

We reject the idea that capitalism can be reformed from within by the Democratic Party or trade-union bureaucrats; or that socialism is possible without the fullest development of democratic forms of working-class and popular power. However, we believe that revolutionaries can legitimately differ on a wide variety of questions, from the theoretical analysis of the former bureaucratic societies in the East to the tactics socialists should pursue in the labor movement. Solidarity is building this sort of revolutionary organization because we

do not pretend to be either the vanguard party or its nucleus. Therefore, we advocate revolutionary regroupment—the coming together of different revolutionary currents who agree on a common practice—as the best way to lay the foundation for a real revolutionary party in the United States.



Solidarity's attempt to build a socialist organization that is both revolutionary and non-sectarian, that has no pretense of being a party or its leadership-in-waiting, is based on our understanding of the actual historical development of the workers' and popular vanguards in the United States and Europe in the 20th century. Before the Second World War, in the words of Ernest Mandel, the group of working people that "even during a lull in the struggle does not abandon the front lines of the class struggle, but continues the war, so to speak, 'by other means'" was both the sociological and *political vanguard of the working class*. Mostly shop stewards or rank-and-file militants in organized and unorganized workplaces, these worker activists argued for militancy and solidarity against the bosses, and for union democracy against the emerging bureaucracies in the established unions. They were also, in their overwhelming majority, socialists and revolutionaries. Put simply, the majority of militant workers before World War II would have described themselves as "reds" of one hue or another.

In Europe this layer of workers had grown massively before the first world war. Literally hundreds of thousands of worker activists across Europe organized in their workplaces and communities against capital and the state. Many joined revolutionary and socialist organizations. In Germany and Italy, skilled machinists in the large factories were the backbone of networks of shop-floor militants who led strikes and slow-downs, often

against the wishes of the officials of the social democratic-led unions. These workers were the audience for Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Antonio Gramsci and other left-wing socialists in the pre-war years.

As the left argued for revolutionary mass action, it often confronted the more conservative policies of the leadership of European social democracy. The social-democratic parties had become advocates of routinized collective bargaining conducted almost exclusively by union leaders. Furthermore, within the social-democratic parties, the revolutionary visions of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were giving way to strategies of parliamentary reform orchestrated by elected social-democratic deputies and party officials. This more conservative, "reformist" strategy was most popular among socialist party functionaries, elected officials and trade-union leaders. Reformism had become an obstacle to organizing the struggle against capital and the state even before the First World War.

The labor officialdom's desire for peaceful relations with the powers that be led them to identify the interests of the workers with those of the national state. Not surprisingly, they supported their own governments when war broke out in 1914. Thus, the social-democratic leaders pitted workers of one country against those of another in a brutal, inter-imperialist war.

During World War I, left-wing workers formed the nucleus of the anti-war movement in the factories and worker neighborhoods as the official leadership of European social democracy supported their own bourgeois governments' war efforts. After 1914, despite the initial wave of popular nationalism, pro-war hysteria and severe political repression, these workers argued and organized against the war. They joined the anti-war wings of the socialist parties in Germany and Italy.

In France and Spain, where industry was less developed, the workers' vanguard did not gravitate toward Marxist politics, but instead toward revolutionary syndicalism. The idea that direct workplace action alone could destroy the power of capital and initiate a new, egalitarian and collectivist social order made sense to highly skilled workers in smaller factories and workshops. They led ongoing struggles to limit the employers' control over the production process and were, as a result, able to exercise considerable job control.

In Spain, the anarcho-syndicalist workers' vanguard included both urban and rural workers. A significant minority of agricultural wage workers joined the anarcho-syndicalist unions, and led numerous, semi-insurrectional strikes on the

capitalist *latifundia* of central and southern Spain. When World War I broke out, the Spanish revolutionary syndicalists led the anti-war opposition, breaking from their French counterparts who supported their own government.

The political organization and consciousness of the European workers' vanguard reached its highest point in pre-revolutionary Russia. Revolutionary socialists, in particular the Bolshevik wing of Russian social democracy, had been sinking deep roots in the working class and student struggles since the 1890s. During the massive strike wave of 1912-1914, the Bolsheviks won the support of the majority of militant workers, in particular the skilled metal workers in the large factories of Moscow and Petrograd. At the center of working-class opposition to the war, these "worker-Bolsheviks" were overtaken temporarily by the semi-spontaneous February revolution of 1917. However, their deep roots in the factories and neighborhoods, and their commitment to uncompromising struggle against both the Tsarist autocracy and the liberal bourgeoisie allowed them to assume leadership of the mass movement in September and lead the first successful socialist revolution in October 1917.

Social democracy's support for the first world war destroyed the internationalist ethos of the mass socialist parties. Angered by the rightward drift of European social democracy but invigorated by the Bolshevik victory in Russia, much of the European workers' vanguard shifted its allegiance to the new and explicitly revolutionary Communist parties after World War I.

While unable to break the loyalty of the majority of workers to the social-democratic parties during the post-war revolutionary upsurges of 1918-1923, the Communist parties were massive. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Communist parties counted tens of thousands of worker members in Britain, Holland, Belgium and Scandinavia and hundreds of thousands in Germany, France and Italy. These mass revolutionary workers' parties were at the forefront of industrial and political militancy across Europe prior to the mid-1930s. They organized important "class-struggle" oppositions in the social democratic-led unions and led unofficial strikes and demonstrations against the employers' offensive and state austerity policies.

In the United States, the pre-World War II workers' vanguard was both smaller and less politically homogeneous than in Europe. But even here, most of the militant and active workers identified with some variant of radical, anti-capitalist politics. Before the First World War, most worker activists were members of either the Socialist Party (SP) or

the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

At its height, the SP had nearly 100,000 members, scores of local newspapers and magazines, and hundreds of elected officials across the United States. While the majority of the SP's members were probably urban professionals and farmers, the party organized a significant number of working-class militants. Rank-and-file SP worker members played crucial roles in "great uprisings" of 1910-1920 that established unions (the International Ladies' Garment Workers' and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' unions) among the predominantly Jewish and Italian immigrant and female garment workers. Often they clashed with fellow (mostly male) SP members in the emerging bureaucracies of the needle-trades unions. The SP in the United States also recruited several hundred skilled metal workers in large factories like the General Electric plant in Schenectady, New York. These machinists led attempts to democratize the International Association of Machinists and transform it from a narrow craft union into a broad industrial union embracing both skilled and unskilled in the metal-working and machine-building industries.

The IWW was the most important organization of militant and radical workers in the pre-war United States. Organizing upwards of 80,000 workers at the high points of the mass strike wave of 1907-1912, the "Wobblies" educated a militant minority of textile workers; "hard rock" (non-coal) miners; lumberjacks; farm workers; steel, rubber and auto workers in class-struggle politics. They recognized direct action in the workplace and community and democratic self-organization as the keys to winning gains under capitalism and creating a "new society from the ashes of the old." Together with the immigrant workers in the SP, the IWW members were in the forefront of the struggle against the United States' entry into World War I. Despite massive and brutal government and private vigilante repression during and immediately after the war, left-wing SPers and Wobblies organized strikes and demonstrations against the war and against U.S. intervention in the Russian revolution. The massive Seattle general strike of 1919 was one of the products of this struggle.

After the Russian revolution, the majority of the pre-war workers' vanguard gravitated to the newly formed Communist Party. But a significant minority of these activists remained revolutionary syndicalists or left-wing socialists. Though much



smaller than the far left prior to 1914, the Communist Party in the United States organized some 10,000 worker militants in the 1920s. The Communists played a central role in organizing the Trade Union Educational League, a network of rank-and-file militants in the AFL unions. They led organized challenges to the bureaucracies in the garment and mine workers' unions, and established beachheads of industrial organization among unorganized workers in steel, auto and rubber. With the onset of the Depression, the Communists helped lead a massive and militant unemployed workers' movement that blocked evictions and won emergency relief on a local level. Numerous scholars have credited that effort with forcing the Roosevelt administration to establish public works programs and federally financed unemployment insurance.

Between 1933 and 1937 a wave of industrial militancy established the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The Communist Party played a leading role again, and its membership grew to between 30,000 and 40,000 workers. During pivotal events such as the West Coast longshore strike of 1934, the 1934 organizing drive at Electric Auto-Lite in Toledo that led to a city-wide general strike and the Akron rubber strike of 1936, the Communists' advocacy of rank-and-file militancy, self-organiza-

tion and independence from the Democratic Party and the Roosevelt administration was essential to victory.

The Popular Front and the Transformation of the Workers' Vanguard

The seventh world congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1935 marked a crucial turning point in the political and social history of the workers' vanguard in Europe and the United States. Stalin and his bureaucracy now dominated the Comintern and were determined to reshape Communist strategies to meet the interests of the Moscow regime. Fascism had smashed the workers' movement in Italy and Germany. These defeats, particularly in Germany, were facilitated by the policies of the social democratic and Communist parties. The social democrats counseled passivity and reliance upon the liberal capitalists who were expected to keep Hitler from taking power.

The Communists, under the political guidance of the Comintern and the Soviet leadership, spent most of their energy denouncing the social democrats as "social fascists" and playing down the threat posed by the Nazis. Despite calls by revolutionaries like Leon Trotsky for a "united front" of Communists and social democrats to stop the victory of fascism, which threatened the annihilation of the workers' movement and its vanguard, the Communists and social democrats remained divided and passive. As a result, Hitler took power in 1933 without any opposition from the largest and best organized workers' movement in the world.

At its 1935 world congress, the Comintern made a belated attempt to rectify its past ultra-left errors, by adopting the strategy of the Popular Front. The Popular Front was, in essence, the same strategy pursued by German social democracy in the early 1930s—electoral alliances with liberal capitalist parties, participation in coalition governments, and the discouragement of all forms of worker militancy that could upset this alliance with progressive capitalists. Yet rather than preserving capitalist democracy against fascism, the Popular Front strategy led to the derailment of revolutionary and pre-revolutionary upsurges. By 1940, that strategy had weakened the labor movement, leaving it vulnerable to a right-wing offensive.

In France, the workers took the Popular Front's election victory in 1936 as a signal that "their government" was in power. While rank-and-file Communists led a massive strike wave, including sit-down strikes at major auto and steel plants, the Communist leadership lectured its own members and the workers who followed them about the need to know "when to end a strike" that might strain

relations with the bourgeois Radical party. The demobilization and demoralization of the workers over the next few years set the stage for the collapse of France during the Nazi invasion of 1940 and the emergence of the Vichy collaborationist regime.

In Spain, the results of the Popular Front were even more disastrous. The Spanish army, under the leadership of Francisco Franco, responded to the victory of the Popular Front coalition of bourgeois Republicans, Socialists and Communists with a *coup d'état* in June 1936. Only a mass mobilization of armed workers' militias led by anarcho-sindicalists and revolutionary socialists in the crucial industrial and agricultural sectors stopped the initial military offensive. Many syndicalists and other revolutionary workers tried to deepen the process of peasant land seizures and workers' takeover of industry, especially in Catalonia in the spring of 1937. The Communists, then in control of the Republican army, smashed the workers' militia that had successfully stopped Franco. In the wake of the disarming of the workers, Franco's armies began their prolonged and ultimately successful offensive against the Spanish Republic.

The Popular Front approach wasted many revolutionary opportunities in the 1930s and led to reactionary victories in France and Spain. Furthermore, it began the long-term process through which the politics and social composition of the Communist leaderships in Europe came to resemble those of the social-democratic parties. Even after the Allied victory in World War II, the Communists continued to pursue alliances with progressive capitalists in order to create "advanced democracies," as steps on the road to a peaceful transition to socialism.

The rightward shift in Communist policies was designed in Moscow. Yet European and U.S. Communists accepted the change eagerly and quickly. The conservatization of the Communist parties both reflected and accelerated gradual changes in the character of both their memberships and leaderships. Beginning in the 1930s in France, and the 1940s in Italy, the Communists assumed the official leadership of the major union federations. By the end of the 1960s, Spanish Communists had become the leaders of the semi-clandestine unions. The systematic demobilization of worker activism in the interests of the Popular Fronts transformed the Communist parties' worker members from rank-and-file leaders into labor officials.

Combined with the growth of the party apparatuses and their cadre of elected officials, the Communist parties of Italy, France and Spain took on the political and social characteristics of the pre-

World War II social-democratic parties of Germany, Britain and Scandinavia. Communist labor bureaucrats and elected officials could deliver higher wages and increased state welfare spending during the long economic boom that began at the end of the Great Depression. But the integration of the workers' vanguard into the labor bureaucracy left the labor movement in Europe unprepared for the long bust that began in the late 1960s. The European Communists' attempt to continue the post-war labor-management peace during the global crisis of profitability failed to stop the capitalist employers' offensive and austerity drive.

In the United States the Communists' adoption of the Popular Front strategy had even more disastrous long-term effects. The Communists were transformed, almost overnight, from advocates of working-class political independence from the Democratic party and capitalist state, and of the need for a labor party, into the foot soldiers of the CIO leadership's campaign for Roosevelt's reelection in 1936. In the United States, the Communists developed the "center-left" strategy of a long-term alliance with labor leaders John L. Lewis and Philip Murray and the emerging CIO bureaucracy. The Communist Party deemed these leaders progressive because of their support for Roosevelt and a collective-security agreement with the Soviet Union. To maintain this alliance and win staff jobs for their members, Communist unionists used their influence in the newly formed CIO unions to successfully block the spread of sit-down strikes in the spring of 1937 to Chrysler and other non-union corporations and to discourage the use of the militant tactics and forms of organization that had been crucial to the CIO's successes in 1936-37.

The first fruit of the "center-left" strategy was the unsuccessful attempt to organize the independent, "Little Steel" corporations in the spring of 1937. While hundreds of young Communists served as organizers for the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), they never challenged Philip Murray's undemocratic and bureaucratic organizing strategy. When the SWOC led a strike against Little Steel, the Chicago police opened fire on unarmed union members and their families. The event was immortalized as the "Memorial Day Massacre." Murray and the Communists called on Roosevelt to condemn the steel bosses, the mayor of Chicago and the governors of Pennsylvania and Ohio. Instead, Roosevelt called for a "plague on both houses," refusing to rebuke the New Deal Democratic mayor or governors. The Little Steel strike was defeated, ending the CIO offensive in basic industry.

The Communists' integration into the lower

and middle levels of the CIO bureaucracy and their subsequent isolation from the rank and file deepened during the Second World War. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the latter's military alliance with the United States, France, and Britain led the Communist Party in the United States to enthusiastically support the U.S. war effort. When the leaders of both the AFL and CIO signed a "no-strike pledge," giving up any workplace action in defense of wages and working conditions for the duration of the war, the Communists became its most zealous enforcers.

Even more tragic than their public denunciations of the United Mine Workers' strike of 1943 was the role of Communist shop stewards, local officers and regional staffers in the auto, steel and rubber industries during the war. Communist union officials, often elected as militants, stood shoulder to shoulder with management in disciplining and firing workers who engaged in unauthorized, "wild-cat" strikes over wages and working conditions. By the end of the war, the Communists' role as enforcers of labor discipline thoroughly isolated them from the ranks of the CIO.

The advent of the Cold War cut short the integration of the Communist element of the workers' vanguard into the CIO bureaucracy. As the U.S. ruling class assumed the leadership of the capitalist world after 1945, it broke its war time alliance with the Soviet Union and declared a Cold War against communism. At home, both Democrats and Republicans used anti-communism to launch a witch-hunt against all forms of domestic radicalism. To maintain its alliance with President Harry Truman's administration, which was demanding a politically loyal labor officialdom, the leaders of the CIO purged Communists and other radicals in the late 1940s and 1950s. This historic divorce between socialist politics and the life of the working class in the post-war United States left the labor bureaucracy of the soon to be united AFL-CIO without significant opposition.

The Crisis of the Revolutionary Left of the 1970s

The recomposition of the workers' vanguard in Europe and the United States radically altered the political terrain for the revolutionary socialist left in the 1950s and 1960s. Gone was the sizeable, if not mass, working-class audience for revolutionary socialist ideas that had existed up until the 1930s and early 1940s. The long wave of capitalist growth brought prosperity to large segments of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries, undermining the need for the tumultuous struggles that had produced and nurtured a growing layer of

radical worker activists in the early 20th century.

The revolutionary left, both in Europe and the United States, was condemned to political marginalization for most of the 1950s. The isolation of these small revolutionary groupings began to end in the 1960s, as they recruited from the student, anti-imperialist, feminist and anti-racist radicalization. However, when the postwar boom ended in the late 1960s, and many of these groups attempted to implant themselves in the working class, they confronted a radically different situation than the one revolutionaries and radicals faced in the 1920s and 1930s.

In the 1960s, there simply was no large working-class milieu educated in the traditions of militant unionism and class solidarity in the United States comparable to that which existed before World War II. Government campaigns of murder and repression against African-American leaders and organizations such as the Black Panther Party had a particularly devastating effect on the small and beleaguered layer of activists radicalized in the 1960s. While younger workers, many of whom were influenced by African-American and anti-war radicalism, did lead numerous "wild-cat" strikes between 1969 and 1973, this layer of workers did not have the strategic vision to negotiate the changing political and economic terrain of class struggle that emerged during and after the global recession of 1974-75. Unable to pose a coherent alternative to the labor officials' strategy of reliance on the Democrats and routinized collective bargaining, much of this new vanguard was dispersed with the factory closures and layoffs of the 1980s.

The revolutionary left of the 1970s—whether Maoist, Trotskyist, syndicalist or left-socialist—did not recognize this changed political reality. Most of the far left assumed first, that a broad layer of workers were already taking action in the workplace and would quickly become radical and anti-capitalist; and second, that the deepening capitalist economic crisis would transform the embryonic rank-and-file movement of the early

1970s into a mass strike wave similar to that of the 1930s. Revolutionaries who "turned to the working class" in these years believed that their main task was to build their party. Their goal was to win the rapidly radicalizing workers to their "correct line." Competitor parties were seen as predators to be smashed. Unfortunately, all of the party-building efforts were small and socially insignificant.

Like their European counterparts, the U.S. labor leadership has proven incapable of providing any strategy to answer the employers' offensive that began in the early 1970s. Yet the expectations of the revolutionary left of the 1970s were unrealistic. The embryonic rank-and-file movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was destroyed by the global recession of 1974-75 and the capitalist restructuring that followed, among other factors. Much of the revolutionary left also underestimated the hold of the labor bureaucracy over the

passive elements of the working class from which the officials derived their survival. A paralysis of nearly twenty years set in before sections of the class began to learn how to struggle under changed circumstances.

Much of the tragedy of the revolutionary left of the 1970s flowed from our failure to recognize the decimation of the pre-war workers' vanguard. The almost complete absence of workers who had kept alive traditions of working-class self-activity and self-organization in the workplace and community was the reef upon which all of the "party-building" projects foundered. As the party-building groups, or what we in Solidarity have called "vanguardists," went into crisis, most of their members became disillusioned with the working class.

The majority of the radicals and revolutionaries who emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s have moved to the right or become inactive. The minority of organizations and individuals that survived the 1970s with pro-working class and revolutionary politics either dug into their union and other movement work, and wrote off socialist organization as irrelevant and unnecessary, or reaffirmed their es-



entially vanguardist projects and declared that the main priority was still to build their "revolutionary party." *Solidarity is a unique response to the crisis of the revolutionary left in the United States. We are committed to building a revolutionary socialist organization that avoids the pitfalls of reformism and vanguardism by coming to grips with the actual situation radicals and revolutionaries face in the United States today.*

IV. Building A Revolutionary Socialist Left Today

As revolutionary socialists and activists we confront a set of problems vastly different from those which our political ancestors dealt with sixty or even thirty years ago. The workers' and popular movements in the United States have suffered a series of profound setbacks since the 1970s. The employers' offensive has been largely successful. Unions are weaker today than at any time since the Great Depression and those that survive have bargained away wages, benefits and working conditions. Meanwhile, Democrats and Republicans compete for corporate donations and upper-middle-class votes by outdoing one another in dismantling the social programs (unemployment insurance, social security) which the workers movements won in 1930s. Also on the chopping block are programs that were greatly expanded in the 1960s under the impact of that era's social movements: Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, job training programs and educational loans.

There has been resistance to the "employers' offensive and the state austerity drive. Unionized workers have challenged concessions. United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local P-9 at Austin, Minnesota's Hormel plant, the Watsonville Cannery workers, the locked-out Staley workers in Decatur, Illinois, and more recently United Auto Workers (UAW) members at General Motors Flint, Michigan, and Dayton, Ohio, plants have tried to fight back. Despite a few victories, most of these strikes have been unsuccessful, primarily because of the strategy and tactics of the official AFL-CIO leadership.

And as for the much-noted rhetorical differ-

ences between the old AFL-CIO and the "new" one, there hasn't been much substantive difference when it comes down to *mobilizing* labor for the broad struggle needed to push back the war on the working class. This reality has become increasingly clear in the case of the Detroit newspaper strike—where the AFL-CIO's verbal commitment to making the strike a "national priority" hasn't been translated into nationwide

action against the Gannett and Knight-Ridder chains.

Networks of committed activists remain within the gay rights and women's liberation movements. They challenge the bipartisan logic of fiscal austerity when they demand government action to fight AIDS and government funding for full reproductive health care. Activists of color also continue to battle police brutality,

anti-immigrant policies and attacks on affirmative action. New environmental organizations, especially those that organize working people and communities of color, are also an important center of resistance. However, the absence of a broad-based fightback leaves these struggles isolated and weakened.

The struggles of the last twenty years have produced a new, but numerically small and politically diverse, workers' and popular vanguard. Within the existing unions, there is a small and generally non-socialist layer of militant workers who have been the mainstay of the struggles against concessions and for the revitalization of their unions. Active in such rank-and-file, reform caucuses as Teamsters for a Democratic Union and the New Directions Movement in the UAW, or leading militant local struggles such as those of UFCW Local P-9 in the 1980s or of the Staley workers today, these workers have developed a "solidarity consciousness." This new workers' vanguard opposes concessions and various forms of labor-management cooperation and embraces militancy and solidarity with the struggles of other workers in the United States and other countries.

The political orientation of this group of workers varies considerably. Within this very thin layer of workers, an even smaller minority con-



sciously rejects the labor officialdom's model of "business unionism" and questions the logic of profitability and competition. With the exception of perhaps several hundred conscious socialists in the labor movement, the bulk of the workers' vanguard today has a contradictory political consciousness. Individual militants may reject concessions, "Total Quality Management," and other forms of labor management collaboration, but still accept the need for "their company" to be profitable and competitive. Other labor activists oppose the anti-labor "free trade agreements" such as NAFTA and GATT and recognize the need for a break with the Democratic Party, but remain open to appeals from right-wing populists like Ross Perot.

Perhaps the most exciting development in the last decade is the rise of community-labor activism, especially in efforts to organize unorganized workers in the growing low-wage sectors of the U.S. economy such as garment, electronics, food processing, restaurants and other services. In parts of the country as diverse as Oakland, California, El Paso, Texas, Rocky Mount, North Carolina, and New York City, working-class activists have attempted to link labor and anti-racist politics in their efforts to organize immigrant and African-American workers. These "workers' centers," many initiated by veterans of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, help educate a layer of worker militants to see the big picture of capitalist restructuring that has transformed their industries, communities and struggles.

Solidarity believes that revolutionaries today need to help rebuild this vanguard and promote the development of a revolutionary socialist current within this grouping of labor and social-movement activists. In the absence of mass struggles, revolutionary socialist ideas will not have an immediate, large-scale response, even among the most active militants in the unions, workers' centers and social-movement organizations. It's only when people organize and collectively confront their employers or the government they develop social power and a radical consciousness. Without the lived experience of successful, mass self-organization and self-activity, the idea of a radical transformation of society will seem unrealistic to most activists. For the rank-and-file unionist, desperately trying to build resistance to concessions or Total Quality Management, the workers' center activist embroiled in the difficult struggle to organize immigrant garment workers, or the reproductive rights activist organizing against the latest attack on the legal right to abortion, the notion of revolution often appears utopian.

While revolutionary socialism may make sense

only to *individual* militants in the labor and social movements, revolutionaries can and must promote class consciousness and activism throughout the small and beleaguered workers' vanguard in the United States today. In fact, one of the main tasks of revolutionaries is to organize and educate a broad layer of worker activists in the politics of militancy, solidarity, democracy and independent political action. The promotion of "class-struggle" (but not necessarily socialist) politics through rank-and-file caucuses in existing unions; workers' centers; cross-industry networks like *Labor Notes*; gay and lesbian, women's, and African-American organizations; and efforts at independent political action are both possible and necessary. Many of the activists we work with in our unions, workers' centers or movement groups may think that socialist revolution is impossible, but they are open to the idea that direct action, alliances with other workers and oppressed groups, democratic organization and autonomy from the Democratic Party are the basis for an effective strategy to defend past gains from the employers and the state.

The development of a core of activists committed to class-struggle politics will be essential to the success of the next wave of working-class and popular struggles. In the absence of an alternative leadership, the labor officials and the middle-class leaders of the African-American, women's, and gay and lesbian organizations tend to derail these struggles into routinized collective bargaining, lobbying, Democratic Party election campaigns and other political dead ends. A network of radical activists with a vision of class struggle will be able to provide an alternative leadership to that of the labor bureaucracy and the movement leaders who ally themselves with the Democratic Party, increasing the chances that the future struggles will be more successful and self-sustaining than those of the last two decades.

The presence of conscious revolutionary Marxists in this layer will be, in certain circumstances, crucial to the ability of militants to transform their unions into fighting organizations or building successful struggles against capital and the state. A new upsurge in the labor and social movements, especially among young people, will also increase the size and political radicalism of the workers' vanguard, creating the basis for the building of a revolutionary party in the United States. The practical success of a revolutionary strategy in a concrete struggle is central to winning activists to socialist politics and recruiting them to revolutionary organizations.

Although we do not believe that there is a large

audience, even among worker and movement activists, for revolutionary socialist ideas in the United States today, Solidarity remains committed to building a revolutionary socialist organization. We publish pamphlets on the crisis of the labor movement and strategies for rebuilding the reproductive rights movement. We hope to attract those individuals in the union reform movement, workers' centers, anti-racist, reproductive rights, and gay and lesbian movements, who are interested in revolutionary socialist ideas. We continue to believe that revolutionary socialist organization is the best means of recruiting and educating activists as socialists and Marxists, of organizing and guiding our movement activism, and of developing a socialist analysis of the concrete realities revolutionaries face. By building a socialist organization today, we hope to lay the foundation for a new revolutionary workers' party that could affect the outcome of a revolutionary crisis in the future.

In accomplishing these tasks, we believe that the classical tradition of Marxism is necessary, but not sufficient. The works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky provide a foundation for the development of a revolutionary socialist theory. But they are not a schema for solving the variety of situations we face. They do not tell us how to organize workers without citizenship rights, to confront the difficult issues of the relationship of class exploitation to gender, racial or national oppression. The classical Marxist tradition does not provide concrete analyses of either the precise forms and limits of the current economic crisis of advanced capitalism, the global restructuring of the labor process along the lines of "lean" and "flexible" production, or the road to working-class and popular political independence in the United States.

Solidarity does not have all the answers to these questions. No group does. The small size, organizational weakness, and political diversity of the workers' vanguard in the United States today place severe limits on the development of any group of revolutionaries. *We believe that none of the existing revolutionary socialist organizations—nor even all of them combined—can synthesize the experience of worker and social-movement activists and provide a coherent strategy (known on the left as a "program") for socialist revolution in the United States today.* Therefore, no one can claim to be the vanguard party or its nucleus.

We in Solidarity advocate *revolutionary socialist regroupment*—the coming together of different revolutionary currents on the basis of common practice and perspectives. In this process we believe that we have as much to *learn* from as we do to *teach* other

socialist militants. We encounter many comrades from other socialist traditions in our activism in union reform groups, workers' centers and other movement organizations. Many of them do not share our assessment of China, Cuba, or the former Soviet Union. Some do not believe it makes sense to build a socialist organization today. Others do not share our emphasis on building rank-and-file movements in the existing unions. And many have unwarranted confidence in the potential of using the Democratic Party to build the workers' and social movements.

Many of these comrades have extensive experience organizing the fastest growing sectors of the U.S. working class—the predominantly immigrant, largely undocumented, and often female workers in low-wage industries in the United States. This experience gives them profound insights into several important questions. They have had to address the relationship between workplace and community organizing in concrete terms, not just in theory. They have strategized about how to deal with the existing bureaucratic unions while building rank-and-file workers' committees in the plants and workers' centers in the communities. Along with anti-racist activists, these comrades have strategized about how to rebuild social power within communities of color. On these, and other issues, we in Solidarity have much to learn.

Our open, experimental and modest approach to politics is essential to promoting revolutionary regroupment today and in the future. We hope that our perspective will allow us and other revolutionaries to develop a healthy give and take with the significant new layer of radical workers who will emerge from the next upsurge of working-class and popular struggles in the United States. To prepare for this upsurge, the revolutionary left needs both a body of concrete strategies and tactics for the working-class struggle to bring to these newly radicalized workers, and a method of work and discussion that will allow us to learn from this new vanguards' experiences and theorization. Only through this sort of synthesis of revolutionary socialists and a sizeable grouping of radicalized workers will the real core of a revolutionary party be created in the United States.

Join Solidarity

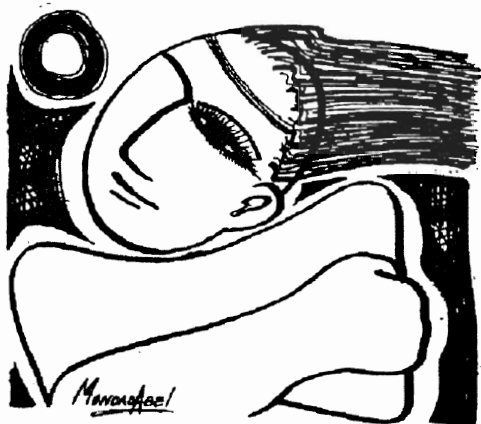
If you are an activist and you find the analysis in this pamphlet convincing, we urge you to join us. We want to work with as many people as possible to both rebuild a layer of militant workers and activists and organize a revolutionary socialist presence in the movements. By joining Solidarity you are connecting yourself to a larger network of ac-

tivists, many of whom deal with issues just like yours. You are also joining a socialist organization which values socialist theory and helps its members learn.

If your organization or collective finds these ideas convincing, we want to talk to you as well. We

believe that bringing together groups of socialists and activists from different left traditions is one of the best contributions we can make to the rebuilding of a socialist left in the United States.

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