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Same Battle, New Field

Problems of Opportunism and Organization

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Criticism of NGO organizing tactics and reformism from the perspective of an Anarchist labor organizer in New England. The piece is meant highlight the need for new forms of organization to meet the needs of the current struggle. (Specific to the U.S. context)

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The mark made on the labor movement by the AFL and CIO is an infected wound out of which pours the lifeblood of labor militancy. Compromise after compromise with capital by the institutions of the American Left generally (labor unions, nonprofits, community organizations etc) have created a Left which is the partner of the capitalist class rather than a threat to its rule, and a labor movement that is weaker than ever before. The failure of the AFL-CIO leadership to support the resistance of indigenous workers at Standing Rock shows in no uncertain terms what the result is when class struggle is relegated to cooperation with the bosses—class betrayal when the stakes are highest. The AFL-CIO’s building trades leadership insisted that the Dakota Access Pipeline would provide “good jobs” for union workers, when in reality this was a deal made specifically between highly skilled crafts guilds and bosses.

The material conditions we now face demand high levels and new forms of organization not currently found within the the framework of Left-opportunist organizations nor within the collectives and cadres of the revolutionary Left. First and foremost

we must reject opportunism in favor of revolutionism in how we understand class struggle.

Class struggle unionism and neighborhood organizations of a revolutionary character must be noted to avoid oversimplifying what are actually contrasting dynamics between the revolutionary Left and opportunist Left. Many comrades influenced by the post-Left tendency have failed to differentiate between the two. In fact many comrades of this tendency are hostile toward unions altogether. The fact is that labor unions are the only mass working-class organizations remaining in the United States since the repression of the Communist Party and the Black Panther Party respectively. Some comrades harbor a misleading caricature that unions are nothing more than an overly bureaucratic means of making peace with capital—that they are irreversibly co-opted by the ruling class. This caricature arrogantly discards an enormous avenue of class struggle available to us—one of the only avenues of mass struggle left to us in the United States. We must refrain from equating every union to the cowardice and opportunism of the AFL-CIO. A union Local is only as militant or concessionist as its membership—the rank-n-file workers. When the occasion arises and the class contradictions become sharpened to a point, so-called ordinary workers are capable of achieving any victory with all the discipline and aggression of a well organized military unit. We can see this militant self-activity demonstrated during every well-organized strike, on every tightly packed picket line, every illegal work slowdown, every act of “wildcat” sabotage.

When rank and file controlled, revolutionary labor unions and community organizations attempt to break with the pattern of unprincipled compromise of today’s Left, they are often targeted by apolitical business unions and well funded Left-opportunist organizations who enjoy a hegemony over “the movement”. When revolutionist organizing efforts fail and fold, the opportunists, who neglected to actively participate in or support them, will point to this as proof that revolutionaries are just adventurists who don’t

know how to steer a campaign or run an organization. The truth is that most campaigns lose whether they are lead by opportunists or revolutionists but Left-opportunists will take every occasion to argue for their philosophy of gradualism and defeatism. Instead of recognizing the necessity of combative rank-n-file Leftist groups, NGO professionals will attempt to dissuade, disrupt and discredit them. Rather than using their resources to contribute to ongoing autonomous rank-n-file movements, NGO Leftists attempt to pacify and control them.

Left-opportunists are of two main varieties: those who are directly on the side of capital, active in Democratic Party politics, pro-business, pro-cop; and those of the faux revolutionary variety. The faux revolutionary will pay carefully scripted lip service to social revolutionary slogans while in practice acting as lobbyists who occasionally put together a well-behaved protest or two. These are opportunists in the tradition of Saul Alinsky. Alinskyan organizations are rigidly formulaic in their strategic approach and cynical in their pragmatism.

The working-class is viewed by the faux revolutionary, the so-called community organizer, as a single ignorant homogeneous mass. The working-class is not seen as having any real power in itself. They view the working and oppressed masses as something resembling a target TV audience who must be convinced of a particular political narrative, made to believe in a particular story. This is what Alinskyans refer to as “the battle of the story” or “narrative power.” Any political action taken by Alinskyan organizations is thus relegated to its potential “narrative power” rather than the material success of the action itself.

The Left-opportunists’ own narrative of the working-class and its capabilities here is false. The working-class is a heterogenous mass of thoughtful individuals each capable of independent ideological development and self-determination. Every day, workers organize, take action and do it themselves without Moses guiding them. Workers realize the “narrative” of their own lives in the class

struggle. When the proper tools are available, workers build and maintain their own resistance to the abuses of the capitalists. The role of an organizer is to provide these tools, offer guidance and stay humble, not unilaterally direct workers toward one end or another.

It is unfortunate that the vigour and political clarity of rank-and-file revolutionists is often harnessed and directed toward dead ends by Left-opportunist tendencies. These groups have perfected the art of throwing militant workers under the bus, chewing them up, spitting them out, using them and abusing them for the limited interests of single issue campaigns that only lead strategically to the edge of a cliff. Many workers who receive this treatment become jaded or wholly reject the Left as an arena of struggle. However some nonprofits are able to manipulate workers whom they've used and abused, continuing to garner sympathy and support for their organizations.

Revolutionary workers must form their own networks of resistance, obtain their own spaces, determine their own strategies toward Liberation. In the absence of real fighting organizations many revolutionary workers will settle for Left wing nonprofits, having their courage, talent and dedication exploited—lions wasted on lambs. Instead of workers organized for themselves in a struggle of our own, the Alinskyans prefer soft minded obedient volunteers for their 501(c)3 manufactured campaigns. The more we rely on and defer to Alinskyan organizations, the less autonomy we have for determining our own resistance; our own collective struggle must thus be approved by the “proper channels” which set themselves outside of that very struggle.

Revolutionists who find themselves engaged in reformist campaigns for nonprofits are often deceived into believing that the campaign is just a way of amassing a wide base of support, and that the truly revolutionary campaign will be set into motion at some later point; but then along comes another grant from yet another bourgeois donor to pay for yet another reformist campaign.

only with Left-wing NGOs, but also with Marxist cadre organizations and Anarchist collective groups whose tendency to simply continue being has long outlived what they are able to accomplish. In a dialectical world the only thing set in stone is that nothing is set in stone. Our methods of organization must be creative and malleable enough to keep pace with each new contradiction.

The cycle continues on like this—social revolution and rank-n-file struggle are neglected in practice while being fetishized in theory. The experience of revolutionists in working with Alinskyan groups can not only be highly demoralizing and but can also serve to conservatize potentially radical workers.

When spontaneous uprisings break out in the street in which workers are self organized and self directed, Left-opportunist's talk out of both sides of their mouth (if they take a position at all). They will seek to maintain good will both with workers fighting in the streets and the fearful but patronizingly sympathetic liberal political class—the petty bourgeoisie. The result is that so-called community organizers walk the fence in a ploy to manipulate workers into passivity and discourse. A sort of jargon is crafted for the purpose of this doublespeak which is recognizable as the language of Alinskyan nonprofits—that of the so-called community organizer.

Let's take the example of a phrase commonly misused by the so-called community organizer: "meet people where they are at". When used by revolutionists or militant trade unionists, this phrase is intended in the physical sense—actually going to the street corners, workplaces, bars, etc where workers "are at". Alinskyans take this phrase to mean that we must not engage in sharp ideological discussions with workers whom we are trying to organize, to say that we must not push for greater militancy and should refrain from the urgent task of raising class consciousness. In the mouths of opportunists, it becomes another excuse not to challenge the points at which bourgeois ideology permeates the working-class and tells workers not to fight. And it is an excuse not to take any position of a polarizing nature at the risk of losing the funding patronage of generous bourgeois donors.

This sort of pandering has translated into a fairly standard organizing style for Leftist groups both opportunist and non. The Alinskyans, with their funding and resources are undeservedly seen as the experts when it comes to organizing, even by many of those who differ from them politically. The Alinskyan organizing style

reflects the cowardice of how they engage politically. The opportunist usage of “meet people where they are at” falsely implies that there is any definite revolutionary program or praxis beyond what is communicated to the organization’s broad base of supporters. When it comes to praxis, most Alinskyans are no more militant or radical than any of the unpoliticized workers they are “meeting”. What you see with Left wing non-profits—directionless broad based campaigns, mobilizing for brief moments instead of real organizing, lots of fluff with no substance—is exactly what you get. The Alinskyans are not interested in social revolution or building working-class power. They are concerned only with the maintenance of their own organizations.

Alinskyans talk of social revolution as a quaint hypothetical, an amusing punchline. A deep self-loathing and despair can be located in the sarcastic tone they take in discussing this topic. They have admitted defeat and they wallow in it. Only the most vulgar of opportunists would treat the topic of our Total Liberation with such cynicism. On the other hand, to the revolutionist there is nothing else but the social revolution, the social war. The revolutionist lives and breathes by the class struggle.

In addition to Saul Alinsky, the writings of Antonio Gramsci conveniently inform theory for Alinskyan non-profit organizations. Using Gramsci’s theory on “cross class alliance”, Alinskyans justify their reliance on grant funding from capitalists, supporting bourgeois politicians, and establishing their base among petty bourgeois “activists” instead of organizing workers. Highlighted here is a significant gap between theory and practice. Grant funding received by non-profits comes with stipulations which require organizers to tokenize the struggles of working folks and stage their “political engagement.” Reliance on the capitalist class for patronage requires that NGOs remain cooperative with bourgeois interests which inevitably steers the political direction of nonprofits Rightward. This is what comes of the supposed “cross class alliance” in practice: Left Wing non-profits make working-class movements

subordinate to wealthy bourgeois liberals. Alinskyans seek to make revolutionists friendly to “sympathetic” bourgeois elements, not the other way around as Gramsci theorized.

Both the Left-opportunism of the Alinskyans and the political pretentiousness of the post-Left are the ideological result of the Left’s abandonment of class struggle in the past decades. Since the New Left of the 1960s class struggle has gone out of vogue. Class consciousness voided the revolutionary Left to be replaced by the proletarian moralism of Mao. These New Leftists centered on college campuses did not view the working-class as an active agent of the revolutionary masses. Young student radicals still routinely see the working-class as “bought off” or irreconcilably backward much to the detriment of realizing their own radical aspirations. The caricature of the middle-aged racist white man as the stock image of working-class America is one of the many myths and misconceptions perpetuated by the New Left and now opportunist and post-Left respectively. Even now, the incorrect view of Trump’s support base as disenfranchised white workers has perpetuated the myth of the so-called “white working-class”, ignoring the historic multi-colored inter-ethnic, international multitude that is the working-class.

This newly developing epoch of struggle which we are now in will require revolutionaries to develop new methods of resistance and organization. Contradictions within our current problems of organization can either offer lessons to create the type of revolutionary formations needed in the present conditions, or simply obliterate altogether the networks and organizations in which these contradictions are contained. It is vital that we be willing to organizationally change shape as the material conditions change shape. The Alinskyans’ attachment to their organizations not only makes them unable to adequately remodel themselves to meet the challenges of constantly changing conditions of struggle, it narrows their organizational focus to self-maintenance rather than effectiveness. We see this pattern of organizational stagnation not