

## **Two problematic tendencies, and two-three problematic practices in RI**

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This document was originally written in late 2013 for internal circulation in RI, to identify and struggle against problematic ways (tendencies) of carrying out our work. However, the problems identified here are also common to communists and activists of other persuasions in much of Canada, and so we are publishing it for a wider forum. Indeed, this document was the result of a conversation in RI about how we carry out and assess our work. Carrying out work in the ways identified here often leads to stagnation and disconnection from mass struggle; or, rather, these ways reflect stagnation and disconnection from mass struggle. Our engaging in this mode as revolutionary communists reflected our having been brought up and trained in a milieu without solid guidance from seasoned organizers, taking up some of the worst practices of the “left” with insufficient critical reflection.

**The first tendency is what I am calling, for lack of a better term, ideologism.** This means to hold that if we “get the ideology correct” and propagandize with the ideology, or if we train ourselves properly in revolutionary theory and ideology, we can solve a number of problems, namely:

1. We can recruit people into RI effectively.
2. We can give confidence to comrades who may not be confident in engaging with mass activists and revolutionary mass activists, or who may not be confident in taking on leadership positions.

There had been a considerable emphasis in RI on completing a project that identified the historical development of the contradictions that exist in Canadian society. However, this project reflected in many ways a form of book-worship, valuing already-produced intellectual information above and beyond concrete investigation on the ground. For one, most of this project would have to be informed by secondary research rather than any wealth of primary social investigation and class analysis (SICA) that we would have conducted ourselves. Although it would have helped in the formulation of a program, it could only do so in concert with proper SICA conducted on the ground, which requires far greater emphasis. Moreover, if we think that publishing a book would attract people to RI, then we need to reconsider what kind of people we expect to attract with what would ultimately have been a semi-academic treatise on the history of Canada.

Similarly, the idea that in a cadre school we would teach people proper revolutionary theory in the abstract, and that would enable them to become effective leaders, was not entirely correct. It is true that effective leadership requires theoretical knowledge, but it also requires organizational skills which come in part from training and also from practice. Practice must be undertaken with the knowledge that it may well fail, or may be limited. But almost any practice yields a considerable set of ideas that outstrip what would be garnered simply from training in revolutionary theory.

To quote Mao Zedong:

Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone; they come from three kinds of social practice, the struggle for production, the class struggle, and scientific experiment. It is [a human]'s social being that determines his[/her] thinking....

Although collectively we had been developing a theory of dual power, we had not actually located this theory in the concrete mass work undertaken by members of RI over the past five years, or even before that. Members of RI have been involved in a wide variety of fields, as RI members or before they joined RI, from workers' struggles, to national minority struggles, to organizing in proletarian

neighbourhoods, to police brutality work, to name but a few.

However, there had been no synthesis of practical experience with theoretical developments. There had been, in other words, no theorization of our own practice, such that we may practice a living and breathing theory and pull a concretely posed strategy with concretely posed tactics out of that. (This also relates to the point of organizational skills: although some of us had developed such skills, we had not assessed organizational forms and practices that have worked best, what have not worked well, how to pass on such skills to others, and our own individual weaknesses that need to be remedied through organizational reinforcement.)

As a result, when we did speak to potential recruits or to each other we could only speak in the abstract, pointing to the concrete in, at best, an incoherent way, or pointing to the Black Panther Party or similar revolutionary projects – because we had not come up with a coherent summation of our own concrete practice. Moreover, our cadre school was not conceived with practical aspects of organizing in mind, for which I take some criticism, having been responsible for putting much of it together. We must now think of concrete organizational skills such as conducting social investigation, distinguishing between setting out objectives and developing a concrete plan to achieve those objectives, planning one's own life, conflict resolution, and most importantly, actually developing a method and practice of organizing people.

To put it in another way, we had not practiced criticism and self-criticism of our own practices in a coherent way. Why have the various initiatives we have underpinned not taken solid root? What were our individual, organizational, practical and theoretical failings? What were our successes and what lessons are we to take forward? We did not engage in sufficient assessment along these lines.

We must “orientate [our] thinking correctly, become good at investigation and study and at summing up experience, overcome difficulties, commit fewer mistakes, do [our] work better, and struggle hard so as to build” ourselves into a good socialist movement, to riff on Mao.

To be clear, I am not making an anti-intellectualist argument here. It is vital to have theory, and to clarify and consistently develop revolutionary theory. But it is vital that this emerges to a considerable part from our own experiences, and always is related to consistent and continued mass work.

**The second tendency, related to the first, is spontaneism.** We believed that interventions in areas where the action is hot with the “correct” line and ideology would draw people to us. But, as a police brutality incident indicated, people may not come through to organize with us in the long-term, for example, if the people who are victims of or leading affectees are mollified by reaction or reformism instead of being effectively organized by us. We are then left having invested time and resources into people without any gains, not least of all because of a paucity of our own leadership. Alternatively, consider disasters and emergencies, and how distant we are from putting ourselves together to actively intervene with practical and ideological leadership in proletarian neighbourhoods.

The problem is one of not being embedded enough amongst masses such that when an event or situation develops, *we are already there*. We are already known, we are already recognized, and we are already – at least somewhat – trusted. We can then be in a better position to play a decisive role in leading people through problems when they do pop off, rather than simply reacting and chasing ambulances.

We cannot predict what conjunctural event will happen or will mobilize the masses in great numbers.

However, we can predict that more and more conjunctural events will occur if the state continues to disinvest in social protection and further invest in militarization and policing. The question is if we are there in the structural cracks to play a role of coordination and connection, or if we keep running after the symptoms without rooting ourselves solidly in the structure.

Revolutionary communists organizing in other countries often spent a lot of time developing a network for their party in various villages. They might even spend one or two years working on just one person in a village. But once that person (often, a teacher or other trusted and progressive minded person) was on board, then s/he could bring more people on board and grow the organization in that area. When something popped off, they were already there, or when the broader campaign/mass mobilization reached that village, they were already prepared. However, for us, the question is of getting in touch with folks in proletarian neighbourhoods to begin with and to gain their trust. For that, we will have to go out there and engage with them consistently.

We have to concentrate our forces geographically and/or sectorally, and build by having concrete plans to engage masses outside of the already-converted mass of left-leaning progressives. For example, can we have a fighting women's organization in the abstract? Or can we have a fighting women's organization when it is connected to community organizing and work amongst the masses of proletarian women? Can we mobilize students in the abstract by waving red banners and picture of Mao Zedong on university campuses? Or can we mobilize students by organizing in and around their high schools before they even (don't) get to university?

Other left-leaning progressives may well come to us when they see our example, as I did from seeing the principled and deep early mass work carried out by RI members and revolutionary mass activists around RI. However, focusing on the already-existing pool of progressives means ignoring the vast unorganized sections of the working-class.

### **On two-three problematic practices**

The upshot of ideologism and even spontaneism is that we located ourselves in two or three practices that petty bourgeois communists and activists find the most comfortable: 1) seminar politics, 2) the politics of commentary, and perhaps 3) rallies/protest politics.

Seminar politics is where we organize seminars, often located at university campuses, and at best, once in a while, off campus. In other words, rather than going to the masses, we expect some section of the masses to come to us, but in truth we were only speaking to the converted and to some new students. Seminars are not, in and of themselves bad, but they are problematic when they become the primary form of our organized engagements.

The politics of commentary refers to when we become very good analysts of situations, events and issues from a Maoist/anti-imperialist perspective. That is great, but unless it emerges from systematic SICA and embeddedness amongst the masses it risks becoming yet another staid socialist or activist propaganda outlet that has no organizational base other than a network of nostalgic subscribers or converted academics, semi-academics, old activists and new students.

Rallies are often related to the two, insofar as they may emerge from some form of preparation done through seminars and commentaries. We may want to march through proletarian neighbourhoods, but what's the point if there is no sustained organizing beforehand to make those proletarians actually want to engage with us? What's the point if we don't produce mass organizations beforehand that take an

active role in organizing marches and giving them a deeper and more embedded proletarian character?

To be sure, seminars, commentary and rallies are not spaces to abandon, but these are spaces that are only ever, at best, *secondary* to the work of going to the lower and deeper sections of the proletariat and building mass organizations therein. The more superficial spaces may provide spaces for consolidation of some revolutionaries, but risk becoming the space in which revolutionaries think they are doing radical work when in fact they are not doing anything particularly radical at all. Going into a committee or a meeting and speaking truth to power is not radical, quite the contrary, that is precisely the essence of reformism.

International solidarity is, unfortunately, a sector of politics that easily gets bogged down in seminar politics and commentary politics. We see a situation developing somewhere overseas or perhaps with the oppressed nations inside the Canadian social formation, and we throw up a seminar, organize a rally (maybe), and write an article about it. That is fine as far as it goes, but if that is all we are able to do then we are going to be at a loss when it comes to forming a revolutionary organization.

The problem of superficial engagement is all the more pointed when considering the relations of non-Indigenous struggles and the struggles of oppressed Onkwehonwe nations in the Canadian social formation. The best way to conduct international solidarity with oppressed Onkwehonwe nations in the Canadian social formation appears to me to be to build fighting proletarian mass organizations in urban areas – naturally this will also involve organizing the Onkwehonwe people who live in urban areas, but forming united fronts of Onkwehonwe organizations with the organizations of other oppressed nationalities (immigrants, migrants) and white proletarians.

If we do not have people in urban areas organized and capable of taking concrete actions, no amount of seminars, rallies and commentaries in and around a limited group of people is going to help the cause of national liberation in a sustained and profound way. It is also only when we have folks organized in urban areas on a mass scale that we can then start to send them out for international exchanges or visits with Onkwehonwe peoples. Otherwise, it will just be a bunch of us already-converted folks and some new students we take with us, but not the lower and deeper sections of the proletariat.

Similarly, with international solidarity abroad, the question we must ask ourselves is how we can use such campaigns to organize proletarians here and press to them the importance of making connections between imperialism abroad and capitalism here in the belly of the beast. That is, anti-imperialism *must* be ultimately brought to anti-capitalist and socialist politics here. Perhaps the most effective form of action is the opposite, that is, organizing people around their issues as they face them here, bringing them to anti-capitalist and socialist politics, is the most effective way of developing an analysis of imperialism and anti-imperialism.

Stagnation in seminar politics and commentary politics and rally/protest politics – and the *ideologism* and *spontaneism* that can give birth to them – are both symptoms and causes of disconnection from the lower and deeper sections of the proletariat.

**We must rectify this.**

- **Sum up our mass work, theorize our practice and extract organizational lessons.**
- **Pass on organizational/organizing skills along with revolutionary theory.**
- **Develop concrete plans (not just lists of objectives) for mass work, training in ideology and skills, and consolidation and growth.**

- **Refrain from prioritizing ambulance-chasing, seminar, rally and commentary politics, unless tied strategically into a plan of mass work. Prioritize the planned mass work.**
- **Practice our theory: work amongst the masses and build mass organizations through concentration of our forces. (You need masses to practice mass line, otherwise it is abstract.)**
- **Intensify the proletarian character and composition of RI through mass work.**