

A LETTER FROM CANADIAN COMRADES

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This statement was [published on Facebook](#) by [David Camfield](#), [Todd Gordon](#), [Brian McDougall](#) and [Sandra Sarnier](#) last week, the day after Socialist Worker [published a letter](#) from the Steering Committee of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) detailing the gross mishandling of a 2013 sexual assault accusation and the resulting organizational crisis. We hope to publish more pieces in the coming weeks that take up the questions of organizational models raised below.

We write from the Canadian state in the hope that the way you grapple with the challenges confronting your organization will strengthen the forces of socialism from below in the U.S.

We were heartened to learn of decisions made at the ISO's recent convention. We were dismayed to read in the [Steering Committee's public letter](#) of March 15 about the 2013 mishandling of a sexual assault allegation. That letter invites "friends and allies to offer advice, counsel, and expertise" and so we write to raise a concern and share an analysis developed in the New Socialist Group (the NSG officially dissolved in 2017 but we continue to be active in local groups with the same politics).

We're concerned that some people will respond to the ISO's crisis by jettisoning revolutionary socialist politics and/or the effort to politically organize around them in some way. This letter doesn't address the range of challenges with which you are grappling at this difficult moment. We write at this time to argue a single point that we think is important: the tendency to jettison socialism from below politics and organizing is increased when people mistakenly believe that the "Leninist" way the ISO has long organized itself — using what we call the micro-party model — is an essential part of revolutionary socialism.

In the name of "building a Leninist organization," the ISO (like so many other Trotskyist groups) has practiced what [Hal Draper called](#) the "organizational method... of 'as if.'" The heart of this is trying to:

act as if we were a mass party already (to a miniscular degree, naturally, in accordance with our resources)...[But] there is a fundamental fallacy in the notion that the road of miniaturization...is the road to a mass revolutionary party. Science proves that the scale on which a living organism exists cannot be arbitrarily changed...Ants can lift 200 times their own weight, but a six-foot ant could not lift 20 tons even if it could exist in some monstrous fashion. In organizational life, too, this is true: If you try to miniaturize a mass party, you do not get a mass party in miniature, but only a monster.

The basic reason for this is the following: The life-principle of a revolutionary mass party is not simply its Full Program, which can be copied with nothing but an activist typewriter and can be expanded or contracted like an accordion. Its life-principle is its integral involvement as a part of the working-class movement, its immersion in the class struggle not by a Central Committee decision but because it lives there. It is this life-principle which cannot be aped or miniaturized; it does not reduce like a cartoon or shrink like a woolen shirt.

Like a nuclear reaction, this phenomenon comes into existence only at critical mass; below critical mass, it does not simply become smaller, it disappears. Hence, what can the would-be micro-mass party ape in miniature? Only the internal life of the mass party (some of it, in a way); but this internal life, mechanically carried over, is now detached from the reality which governs it in a real mass party.

The ISO has practiced a modified version of the micro-party model developed by the British SWP. This approach has been less damaging than other versions. But we believe that any attempt to apply some approximation of a Leninist party model to a small group (whether that model originates with the Bolsheviks, the earliest years of the Comintern or, as has been more common among Trotskyists, the Comintern after it was “Bolshevized” under Zinoviev from 1924) — and the ISO is a tiny group in the context of U.S. society — is a mistake. This attempt is one of the causes of the ISO’s difficulties.

As our comrade [David McNally wrote in 2009](#) to someone who was until recently a member of the ISO Steering Committee:

One of the great problems with the dominant model of “Leninism” on the far-left is the idea that the legacy of Bolshevism involves steadfastly building a small group that

eventually wins leadership of the working class movement. Given that there is no army, no class vanguard, ready to be lead, the small group project becomes the construction of an ostensible leadership-in-waiting.

This then gets transmuted into the notion that the task is to make sure “we’ll be ready” — with a disciplined cadre and a determined leadership — when the masses look to the left. In the process, a completely undialectical notion of leadership develops — one in which ostensible ‘leaders’ can be selected and trained outside the process of building a real mass working class movement. A hothouse conception of leadership thus comes to the fore, according to which revolutionary cadres can be artificially bred in the atmosphere of the disciplined small group.

All of this produces a fetish of leadership. Since we are incapable of building a mass organization, goes the thinking, we’ll do the next best thing — maybe even the best thing — and build the leadership without which revolution is impossible. And all of this — the building of a leadership and disciplined membership — comes to comprise the core of a doctrine called “Leninism.”

McNally continues:

*Rather than address the really crucial questions — how is the left to rebuild practices, organizations and cultures of working class self-mobilization so that a working class vanguard” —in other words, a layer of anti-capitalist fighters of the kind that hasn’t existed in the U.S. for decades, as Charlie Post and Kit Adam Wainer discuss in their pamphlet [Socialist Organization Today](#), elements of which are just starting to emerge in the U.S. thanks to the exciting radicalization that’s happening— *might actually be re-created, and a meaningful party built in its ranks--real social-historical problems get reduced to questions of building the small group: recruiting more members, selling more papers, creating new branches.**

*Now, let me be clear: **effective socialist organizations are indispensable to the task of rebuilding what I have called “practices, organizations and cultures of working class self-mobilization.”** For this reason, we need dynamic and growing socialist forces. There is nothing wrong with socialist organizations trying to extend their reach; on the contrary, this is necessary and important. After all, the rebuilding of a real working class vanguard — as opposed to small groups that claim to be such (even if only in embryo) — will require organized socialist activists dedicated to that*

task.

Sexual harrassment and assault are problems in all organizations in societies where gender oppression exists. But there is often a connection between the micro-party approach and inadequate responses by a socialist group to oppressive actions by members. This approach tends to inflate the importance of the group in the minds of its members. Preserving the group often becomes an end in itself. When people make the stability or preservation of the leadership and its “Leninist” authority their top concern, they may avoid suspending or expelling members, especially “leaders,” for oppressive behavior.

Organizing on micro-party lines with a “fetish of leadership” can fuel an abusive group culture. That kind of culture reproduces rather than challenges our societies’ oppressive forms of behavior. And socialist groups that treat their own expansion as what matters most are usually resistant to opening themselves up to struggles against oppression, learning from them, and changing.

We’re convinced that what should be discarded isn’t socialism from below, but the “Leninist” micro-party model. We don’t offer you another model. Instead, we encourage you to draw on your experiences and those of other socialists and engage in informed experimentation.

As [Duncan Hallas put it](#), “useful argument about the problems of socialist organization is impossible at the level of ‘universal’ generalizations. Organizations do not exist in a vacuum. They are composed of actual people in specific historical situations, attempting to solve real problems with a limited number of options open to them.”

We hope that you will be able to develop a new way of organizing that helps you to contribute to advancing the self-organization of the exploited and oppressed in the situation in which you find yourselves.

With our best wishes,

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Sandra Sarner, Toronto

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