

MEMO FROM DETROIT ICC MEMBERS

This is a memorandum from the Detroit ICC delegation for the upcoming national meeting and ICC discussion. The first sections deal with political issues, including the Party's tasks in organizing against national oppression, class exploitation and imperialist war, and the importance of reviving the transitional program in our daily political work. The second sections deal with organizational questions, including the necessity for reorganization and centralization in the Party.

I. INTRODUCTION

Organizing against national oppression, class exploitation and imperialist war: Lessons from the struggle in Detroit and beyond. Taken from a talk by comrade Abayomi Azikiwe at the Midwest Marxism School hosted by the Michigan Branch of Workers World Party on April 13-15, 2018.

Events since the beginning of 2018 indicate that the class struggle is intensifying in various sectors of the proletariat in the areas of education, communications, housing, culture, healthcare, food services, etc. These developments come at a time of extreme importance to the masses of working people, nationally oppressed and youth in the city of Detroit and throughout the world.

We have witnessed over the last few days the machinations of imperialism in their ongoing war against the people of Syria and the entire geo-political region commonly referred to as the Middle East. For the last 70 years with the occupation of Palestine and the encroachment of Zionism into North Africa, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon and the repeated threats against the Islamic Republic of Iran, there is no doubt that U.S. imperialism is aiming to reverse the process of national liberation and unity among the overwhelming majority of peoples around the world.

Living here in the U.S. places tremendous responsibility upon us to address these issues concretely. For it is our labor and tax revenues which are used to rain down terror on the peoples of the Middle East, Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, Latin America and the Caribbean.

At the same time, the objectives of imperialism are manifested inside the U.S. through the further impoverishment of the proletariat, the intensification of state repression disproportionately targeting the African-American, Latinx, Muslim, Asian and other oppressed nations and nationalities as well as women and LGBTQ people. Although we are constantly bombarded with ruling class propaganda about threats of "terrorism" both domestically and abroad, there are greater threats which we face every day from the bosses and bankers along with their agents embedded in the capitalist state apparatuses.

It is no accident that our organizing work and activism takes on a dual approach of both addressing the concrete conditions facing us on a local level while pointing out that these exigencies are part and parcel of a much broader system of exploitation and repression which is national and international. V.I. Lenin in his groundbreaking work from 1916 entitled

“Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism” properly identifies international finance capital as the principal enemy of the workers and oppressed peoples around the world.

Lenin noted in this book that: “[T]he twentieth century marks the turning-point from the old capitalism to the new, from the domination of capital in general to the domination of finance capital.” (Chapter II, Banks and Their Role)

If the previous century was marked by the dominance of the financial sector over the capitalist system as a whole, then our task in the 21st century is the destruction of international finance capital as a means to realize the liberation of humanity from oppression and exploitation. Socialism, the ownership of the means of production utilizing a state controlled by the workers and the oppressed, is the only solution to the problems of the poor and dispossessed.

This is why we have targeted key elements which are manifestations of the crises of capitalism and imperialism. The housing question, access to water, non-representative government, racist state repression, the elimination of racism and gender oppression, are all within the purview of our work.

We demand an indefinite moratorium on homes foreclosures and evictions. There must be decent housing for all. In addition, all people have a right to water, heat and energy resources in the modern world. Everyone should be free of violent repression by the police and other agents of the capitalist system and the state.

Education, which is being destroyed systematically by the capitalist state, is yet another mechanism designed to keep our class in permanent ignorance and obscurantism. This is why we are in complete solidarity with education workers and students who are under tremendous pressure by the ruling class.

We have the duty to both build a revolutionary party of the working class and oppressed while mobilizing and organizing workers around issues which are impacting the masses on a daily basis. This is a delicate balance that must be grappled with in our organizing work.

Every revolutionary movement has had to develop similar approaches. The Bolsheviks won over the workers and farmers through three key demands: “Bread, Land and Peace.” We are mandated to study the history of anti-capitalist struggles, national liberation movements and socialist revolutions worldwide.

Let us not be ensnarled by perpetual spontaneity, tail-ism and its consequent opportunism and careerism. Serious activists must analyze the contemporary situation and devise strategies and tactics to enhance our effectiveness in order to build a revolutionary organization. History requires that we rise to the occasion.

A revolutionary Leninist party is the missing element in the present situation in the U.S. today.

Many people are willing to fight. We are only lacking the mechanism to concentrate these struggles into a disciplined force capable of seizing power and creating a society devoid of exploitation and oppression.

II. TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM

The ideological heritage of our founding comrades was not just their writings on international events. Founding comrades Sam Marcy, Dorothy Ballan and Vince Copeland wrote extensively on applying the transitional program to the class struggle in the U.S. They understood that the struggle around “economic demands” was a critical aspect of the Party’s intervention in the political struggle against capitalism.

In this period, where the attacks on the basic rights to survival, water, shelter, food, jobs, etc., manifest themselves constantly, the necessity to revive the transitional program within the party and to apply transitional demands to the struggles of our class present themselves every day. As Comrade Mond said at the Midwest Marxism School, every time there is an eviction or water shutoff in a city like Detroit or Chicago it is a monument to white supremacy that must be torn down.

Trotsky described the importance of the transitional program as follows:

The strategic task of the next period — prerevolutionary period of agitation, propaganda and organization — consists in overcoming the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard (the confusion and disappointment of the older generation, the inexperience of the younger generation). It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today’s conditions and from today’s consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.

In the book “High Tech Low Pay,” Comrade Sam Marcy discussed the application of the transitional program in what were then the earlier stages of the technological revolution and changing character of the working class (more oppressed and women workers). He emphasized the need to frame transitional demands in legal language where possible because of the belief in “legal rights” that permeates large sections of our class. Of course, while framing demands in such a way, we always emphasize that it is the struggle that is the only way to win these “legal rights.”

The essence of all transitional demands is to move the workers in the direction of confronting capitalist property relations, whether in the worksite, home, hospital or occupations of whatever institution is involved. That is what distinguishes transitional demands from social democratic demands to “reform” the system. Most importantly, raising transitional demands that truly speak

to the workers' needs and capture their attention and imagination, allows us to make up for our small size with the boldness of our program.

A. The Party's application of the Transitional Program in the 1980s

Up until the early 1990s the party embraced the transitional program. An example of how the Party carried out this perspective was the Food is a Right Campaign, where the party sued the federal government for the release of surplus food during the recession of 1982. The party held mass rallies in Detroit preparing our class to locate the warehouses and liberate them, and organized a hunger march from Baltimore to Washington, DC.

Another effort utilizing transitional demands was the Job is a Right Campaign, first proposed in a front page article by Comrade Sam in response to the announcement of massive plant closings by General Motors in December 1986. We had one comrade in an auto plant in Detroit that was closing, and sent one or two comrades to Flint. But with the support of the entire Party, we built a national movement to challenge the plant closings by GM and other corporations because we had a program that articulated the workers' property rights to their jobs, while the million-person UAW was paralyzed. The movement included a workers' demonstration that disrupted the National Governors' Conference in Traverse City, Mich., in-plant meetings with thousands of workers on both shifts at a GM plant slated to close, a national meeting on plant closings at the UAW local associated with the Flint sit-down strike, and a tent city on the Michigan capitol grounds.

B. Transitional Program applied to banks' war on Detroit from 2005 to present

In the mid-2000s the banks launched their massive foreclosures that particularly targeted African-American and Latinx communities and led to the destruction of 53 percent of Black wealth and 66 percent of Latinx wealth across the U.S. in approximately five years. Detroit, as the city with the highest African-American home ownership in the U.S., was particularly devastated. One-third of the city's 360,000 homes were lost to foreclosure.

Every state has provisions for the governor (or sometimes local officials) to declare a state of emergency to avert a natural or man-made (corporate-made) crisis that can be utilized in advancing the transitional program. The first step is to demand a state of emergency under the particular law in effect in the state. Then to demand that the official implement whatever transitional demands are being raised to meet the emergency. Most importantly, we begin implementing the program ourselves through our actions.

We utilized this approach in the campaign for a moratorium on foreclosures. We demanded the governor declare a state of emergency and implement a moratorium on foreclosures and even succeeded in getting a bill introduced. We pointed out the legal precedent for such moratoriums which were won through the unemployed struggles in the 1930s and upheld by the U.S. Supreme

Court during the 1930s. Most importantly, we took the moratorium campaign to the community and stopped numerous foreclosures and evictions through direct actions such as move-ins or preventing dumpsters from being placed in front of homes slated for eviction, and by numerous pickets and occupations of the banks. The Occupy Detroit movement adopted the campaign and organized a Detroit Eviction Defense Committee which still operates.

C. Anti-capitalist intervention against emergency management and austerity

Under monopoly capitalism, the banks play a central role in every attack on the workers and oppressed. By examining bond deals and studying financial statements, we can become familiar with these deals and point out their fraudulent, swindling character. This strengthens the demand for canceling the debt and positions the Party as the anti-capitalist voice in the larger struggle. Seriously raising a transitional demand means going beyond just raising a slogan. Rather, it means putting the forth the demand in a serious manner both in substance and tactics, so the workers perceive the demand as winnable even as its essence is a direct challenge to capitalist property relations.

Detroit became the epicenter in the U.S. of the struggle against the destructive forces of finance capital. After one-quarter of the population was driven out of the city through 65,000 mortgage foreclosures based on racist, predatory, fraudulent mortgage loans between 2005 and 2010, the city was in financial crisis and an emergency financial manager was placed over the city.

There was a large movement that developed challenging this usurpation of democratic rights and self-determination for this African-American city. Our comrades, while completely supporting the anti-racist struggle against emergency management, studied the emergency manager bill and noted that the emergency manager was mandated to guarantee payment of debt service to the banks and was empowered to break contracts and privatize city services to do so.

The Party pointed out that behind this racist law was the imposition of direct control of the city's finances by the banks, the same banks that had destroyed our neighborhoods with their massive foreclosures. We obtained all the city loan documents through a Freedom of Information request, studied them, and became familiar with the fraudulent character of the city's debt service, especially with the interest rate swaps owned by Bank of American and UBS. When the emergency manager took the city into bankruptcy to steal the pensions of the city retirees, we were the only left party to intervene in the municipal bankruptcy, with daily demonstrations calling for cancellation of the debt and guaranteeing the pensions and city services, and even with legal intervention in a trial against the banks and their interest rate swaps during the bankruptcy proceedings. We pointed out how the massive water shutoffs that have led to 100,000 homes in Detroit having their water shut off were similarly initiated to pay off termination fees to the banks on swaps on water bonds, and our comrades brought that issue into the bankruptcy as well.

The Party carved out a large role in the struggle against emergency management and the Detroit bankruptcy precisely because we developed a programmatic approach that targeted the real source of the crisis in Detroit: finance capital. And to this day our branch and its mass organization is known throughout the movement of the workers and poor as the organization to turn to in order to fight the banks and the capitalist system.

D. Linking U.S. workers' struggles to the international movement against austerity

We can and must link our struggles for the most basic human needs of the workers to the worldwide struggle against austerity, bringing internationalism to the workers. A highlight of the recent National Conference to Defeat Austerity was not just the reports from different cities which helped the many Detroit workers and community activists in attendance feel that they were not fighting alone, but also the terrific session on the international dimensions of the struggle against austerity featuring two Puerto Rican comrades including the former president of the Electrical Industry and Irrigation Workers Union of Puerto Rico (UTIER), a statement from Jose Maria Sisson from the Philippines, a young woman just returned from Lebanon, a speaker on Cuba, and solidarity statements from Italy and the Spanish state. The next day, Ricardo Santos Ramos from Puerto Rico did a Facebook video while we toured a hard-hit Detroit neighborhood. It got over 50,000 views, with many Puerto Ricans bemoaning the fate the banks have in store for them upon seeing Detroit's neighborhoods (pretty wild when you consider they are still recovering from the hurricanes).

The day-to-day struggle around the basic needs of the workers and oppressed necessitates attacking the capitalist system to win anything. The reformists are incapable of formulating demands that meet the crisis by limiting the struggle to reform within the confines of bourgeois property relations. We have no such limitations. Raising transitional demands that speak to the immediate needs of our class while moving the workers and oppressed in a direction of challenging the foundations of capitalism allows the Party to intervene in these struggles in a serious manner even where our numbers are small. This is the art of revolution, an art that is part of the legacy of Workers World Party, and which must be revived in the Party so that new young comrades are steeled in working-class struggles and girded for the battles to come.

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Respectfully submitted,

Detroit ICC delegates Abayomi Azikiwe, Kris Hamel and Jerry Goldberg and alternates Mond Jones, Kayla Pauli and Joe Mchahwar

May 24, 2018