

An Unfortunate Split from Socialist Alternative

A statement to members and supporters from SA's executive committee

September 26, 2018

Below is a statement that was sent to Socialist Alternative members shortly after we were informed of resignations from our organization. Unfortunately, the small group that split from Socialist Alternative has posted political and personal attacks on our organization and members on social media. They have also distributed internal documents to many left activists outside of Socialist Alternative, and now those documents are being widely posted on the internet. Therefore, we are given no choice but to share this statement with our supporters to briefly set the record straight. We aim to put this conflict behind us, so that we can move on to focusing on our work of building the socialist and labor movements and fighting the Trump regime and billionaire class.

A group of 30 members announced on September 20 that they were resigning from Socialist Alternative. While this unfortunate split from our organization was not entirely unexpected, it has been carried out in a thoroughly unprincipled manner, including stealing contact lists of members, supporters, petition signatories and donors to our organization and broader campaigns that we have led. When we uncovered clear evidence of this theft a few days ago, this group refused to discuss the issue and instead exited our organization, stealing a social media page and a local branch bank account.

While some differences on tactics emerged in the course of the debates with this group, we did not feel that these disagreements were substantial enough to justify factions or a split. Through most of a year and a half long debate, the people who quit Socialist Alternative themselves agreed that the differences were not significant enough to justify the sharp divisions. However, in spite of failing to convince any of our democratically elected bodies, from our Executive Committee and our National Committee, to the Seattle City Committee and the Seattle Convention, they nonetheless persisted in their bitter factional campaign. Over the course of this process we organized more than 100 hours of democratic discussion, as well as a written debate spanning more than 400 pages with what became known as "the minority group."

The leaders of this split, Philip Locker and Stephan K, are the former National Secretary and Seattle Organizer for Socialist Alternative respectively. After dealing with the effects of the minority's toxic campaign for more than a year, a revolt from below broke out with Socialist Alternative members strongly objecting to the approach of this group's leaders. A letter signed by a large majority of Seattle's active membership stated that the minority group "hijacked our efforts to have a healthy debate" and has "repeatedly broken with an approach of working in solidarity with the Seattle organization." The vast majority of members in Cincinnati objected in writing to this faction's "toxic approach (that) violated the healthy standard of discussion that we have cultivated in our branch for years."

The campaign waged by this group and now its split were carried out in an increasingly dishonest and unprincipled manner. Socialist Alternative's National Convention, our highest democratic body, is meeting in just one month. It is deeply unfortunate that rather than debate political differences in front of our elected delegates, the minority group is choosing at this time to split from our organization.

Since this group has stolen our lists and split from Socialist Alternative, we expect that a statement from them will arrive in the inboxes and social media feeds of many supporters of Socialist Alternative, 15 Now, Movement for the 99% as well as the Kshama Sawant and Ginger Jentzen campaigns. While we feel that this split was unnecessary, lessons can be gained from this experience.

Wider Context

In the last few years, the crisis of capitalism and the ensuing deep polarization in society has created new challenges and opportunities for socialist activists. From Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter to the teachers' strikes to Bernie Sanders' campaign, struggle has intensified, and interest in anti-capitalist ideas has grown. The growth of right-wing populism and Trump's election have provoked mass protests, but, up until now, no new ongoing, organized mass force has emerged to fight the right wing and the billionaire class.

In this context, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has grown rapidly, attracting tens of thousands of young activists, and has recently made an impact in national politics with the victories of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Julia Salazar. While we have differences with [DSA's politics](#) and [strategy](#), this is an exciting development for Marxists and poses new questions for how to win socialist change in the twenty-first century.

Socialist Alternative has also grown rapidly in recent years, particularly in areas where we have made a contribution to winning important victories alongside other forces on the left. When Kshama Sawant was elected in 2013, we had only 250 members nationwide concentrated in just a few cities. Yet, we were able to help win the fight for the first \$15 an hour minimum wage, first in Seattle and then in Minneapolis. In just three short years after Kshama's election, we grew not only in terms of members, new branches and influence, but also many more people developed into leaders within our organization.

The existing leadership of Socialist Alternative had to adjust to this new situation and challenges both inside and outside of our party. Unfortunately, a section of our leadership could not deal with the inevitable debates and new challenges that emerged in a healthy manner. Philip Locker, as our National Secretary, and Stephan K, as the lead Seattle organizer, treated other leaders working around them in an "increasingly belligerent manner," by their own admission. These methods became increasingly intolerable and led to an unnecessary shattering of working relations in our leadership. When confronted about their methods, Philip

and Stephan chose to organize a tightly-knit grouping within our Seattle organization rather than to try to rebuild trust with other members of the elected leadership.

An Unnecessary Faction

The working class is strongest when it is unified in struggle with clear aims and a strategy to win victories. The same is true of the socialist movement, and this is why we generally prefer [unification](#) to division. Sometimes sharp political debate within a Marxist organization, and even the establishment of separate groups, can help to test out ideas and clarify important differences. However, thus far the current split has done more to undermine healthy debate in Socialist Alternative than to clarify issues.

Unfortunately, this split is another example of one of the worst practices in political organizations. A combination of small differences and big egos has blown up into damaging, unnecessary divisions. In similar situations, Socialist Alternative and the Committee for a Workers' International have been willing to part ways with toxic leaders like Alan Woods in Britain or John Throne in the US.

The divisions developed openly in 2016 and first came to a head in April 2017 over the methods being used by Philip and Stephan, which included bullying, maneuvering and unnecessarily polarizing around even small disagreements when they were unable to convince others. For many months, Philip and Stephan said they agreed that the breakdown in relations in our leadership wasn't necessary and was out of proportion to the actual disagreements on priorities, strategy and tactics. Yet they persisted in their methods, and they lost the confidence of their closest long-term collaborators, subsequently burning all bridges in dramatic fashion.

There had been signs before of these imbalanced leadership methods, including a serious crisis in our Seattle organization in 2012 due to Philip's bullying. Stephan has had similar breakdowns in relations throughout his history of activism, which resulted in him having to leave leadership bodies on which he had formerly served. However, our organization took the approach of patiently working through the difficulties and giving them chance after chance to learn from their mistakes and rebuild trust.

Any working class organization is made up of people with strengths and weaknesses, and a collective leadership can build a team that overcomes weaknesses to put positive traits in service of the workers' movement. At the same time, it was clear Philip and Stephan needed to be held accountable as elected leaders and staff of Socialist Alternative. A series of Executive Committee meetings during 2017 attempted to resolve this situation, but to no avail.

Then in a further effort to clarify issues, find a road to repair relations, and develop meaningful roles for Philip and Stephan, the situation in Socialist Alternative's leadership was discussed at length by our National Committee, leaders of the [Committee for Workers' International](#) worldwide, at our Seattle City Committee in late 2017 and early 2018 as well as by

the Seattle Convention, the annual gathering of all Seattle members. Resolutions were passed overwhelmingly confirming that there was no justifiable political basis for factions to be organized and expressing concern over Philip and Stephan's methods. We also voted on role changes in a further attempt to repair relations, including moving Stephan from Seattle organizer to our Editorial Board.

A breakdown in working relations is not uncommon among activists, especially given the enormous pressures of our work. However, what made this crisis unusual was the attitude and method with which Philip and Stephan approached the situation and their complete unwillingness to take on board the overwhelming feedback they were receiving. They insisted their belligerent behavior was not central to the breakdown and instead argued significant political differences were at root.

Unfortunately it must also be recorded that in the course of this conflict, Philip reserved his most vicious verbal attacks for young women who challenged him. Branches and leadership bodies who witnessed this ongoing behavior felt compelled to document some specific instances of Philip's verbal bullying of young women.

False Justifications

Philip and Stephan launched their group in the wake of the rejection of their methods in Seattle, and it was only after extensive meetings that they began to retroactively construct political arguments to justify organizing a faction. They later resigned from their positions on our national day-to-day leadership and as regular staff for the organization, claiming they were being "shut out." They went on to claim that without their personal leadership Socialist Alternative would become an "abstract propagandist organization" incapable of "principled mass work." When confronted with arguments about how Socialist Alternative was still playing a central role within important movements and mass campaigns without their direct involvement, they added the accusation that the Seattle leadership "bends to opportunist pressure."

Debate is central to the functioning of Socialist Alternative. Such debates can lead to sharp discussion which is best carried out in a structured and balanced way--in proportion to our work in movements--in order to clarify how best to build struggles and the forces of Marxism. However, this group's bitter and polarizing approach only served to make meaningful discussion all but impossible. Kshama Sawant, who had stood up to Philip and Stephan in Seattle, was especially a target of their attacks. This group charged that because Kshama refused to accept their bullying she was therefore unaccountable, ultimately insinuating that massive mistakes were only a matter of time. They even raised the role of reformist socialist party leaders in World War I who helped send millions of workers to their deaths in that imperialist slaughter as a way of showing what was at stake!

Of course, many issues needed to be debated within Socialist Alternative during the course of this internal conflict, from our approach to DSA to our tactics in Seattle and a whole host of other questions. On every tactical issue that came up--from our slogans at anti-Trump rallies to the fight for single-payer healthcare and a vote on Seattle police chief Carmen Best--Philip and Stephan's group aimed to turn it into a justification for their faction's disruptive approach. Some members of the majority agreed with Philip and Stephan on specific questions while disagreeing on others, but increasingly an overwhelming majority objected to the unhealthy way the minority group approached every discussion. Their small group produced over 200 pages of documents, demanded extra speaking time at meeting after meeting, and often paralyzed our work with endless acrimony. We will address the Carmen Best vote, Kshama's speech on the issue, and the ensuing media coverage in a separate article over the coming days.

Regrettable Course

We believe many of the issues could have been debated in a different way, without hostility, impatience, cynicism, or an organized faction. For over a year, we maintained hopes that the minority group would change course based on discussion in the organization.

They have accused Socialist Alternative of violating their democratic rights. However, they had the right to air their views at every level of the organization at numerous meetings involving hundreds of members and hundreds of pages of material distributed through the organization. The truth is they simply were not able to convince people.

To prepare for our National Convention, we offered to pay for members of their faction (mostly based in Seattle) to fly to every region of the country to argue their points in person to all Socialist Alternative members, but they declined this opportunity. Instead they decided to steal money, social media accounts, email and phone lists, and abruptly split from the organization just a month before our National Convention.

It appears they wanted to avoid another difficult debate in which their views and proposals would likely again have been voted down by overwhelming majorities as has happened at our last three National Committee meetings. The minority group was also aware of letters to the Convention from the majority of active Seattle and Cincinnati members demanding that this debate come to a close and recommending temporary suspension of five members of the minority group's leadership if they did not adjust their approach. However, this outcome was not a foregone conclusion. The debate had not been fully conducted in all areas of the organization, and the minority was given yet another chance to reverse course.

Despite all this, there is a road back to the ranks of Socialist Alternative for those members of this small group who are prepared to make a decisive break with these unhealthy methods and rebuild trust. For our part, Socialist Alternative will continue to build struggles of working people and the oppressed, and to point the way forward to a socialist world.

With this conflict behind us, we will aim to learn lessons from it that can strengthen our understanding and our resolve to end capitalism and usher in a society free from exploitation. Towards this end, we will continue to build a Marxist organization with a genuinely collective leadership rooted in working class reality and a thoroughly democratic culture. These methods are the bedrock of our ability to develop the best ideas and to unite workers and oppressed people in struggle.