

My Concerns about the Election of the Seattle Executive Committee and My View of the Internal Debates

Letter from Ramy Khalil to the National Committee

December 5, 2017

Opportunities to build the Marxist movement are growing in the U.S. We've made great strides, particularly in Seattle and more recently in Minneapolis, and we are in a position to make further gains.

Unfortunately our national leadership has recently become bitterly divided. It is incumbent on all of us, myself included, to take these issues seriously and find a principled resolution. We must work to bridge the divide, avoid misunderstandings, rebuild trust, and find a path forward to joint work, even if we don't agree on everything.

The political disagreements in the national leadership came to a head around the breakdown in relations on the Seattle Executive Committee (SEC). What led to this?

I would have preferred not to write this letter. But given the intensity of the divisions and the lack of clarity of the causes of the conflict, I think it will help the NC to explain my views about the origins of the conflict and how I believe we can begin to overcome it.

June Election of the Seattle EC

The City Committee is a leadership body (currently 27 members) elected annually (or as needed) by the Seattle SA convention. The City Committee meets monthly to guide the overall direction of our work. The City Committee elects the Seattle EC to serve as the day-to-day leadership with an overview and decision-making power over all areas of our work: City Council work, the Seattle Party-Building Team, branch work, union work, etc. The Seattle EC is accountable to the City Committee and, in turn, the City Committee is accountable to the City Convention.

In June, the National Executive Committee did something unprecedented in my 21 years in SA. The National EC arranged for Bryan K to attend the Seattle City Committee and propose that the City Committee elect a new Seattle EC. The national EC told the Seattle City Committee that Stephan was needed for national work and therefore should no longer serve on the Seattle EC. The real reason for this new slate, however, was not explained transparently to the City Committee. The real reason was that a breakdown of relations had developed on the Seattle EC between Kshama and Stephan. This conflict was never explained to the majority of the City Committee members; only the Seattle NC members were informed through one-on-one discussions.

Disagreements about Mass Work

Both sides agree there were a lot of minor political and organizational disagreements that arose over the previous two years that contributed to growing tensions. Both sides point to disagreements around tactical questions of the mass work we are engaged in in Seattle: a Wells Fargo protest ad in *The Stranger*, coordination between our 10 branches and our council office, the May Day strikes, how to engage Sandernistas and DSA members, the safe states argument in our Bernie tactic, etc.

These tensions inevitably arise as we are a small organization which recently elected a councilmember, quadrupled in size, and are now required to sometimes speak to tens of thousands of people. All comrades on the Seattle EC, especially Kshama, have great responsibilities and stresses weighing on them every day. My understanding is that everywhere the CWI has elected comrades to major public office, tensions very often arise between our public representatives (or union representatives) and the wider needs of our party. As Sarah White and I wrote in our document, "Successes and Challenges in Building Seattle SA":

One challenge we should keep in mind is that our council office is regularly compelled to carry out initiatives that are completely correct and necessary, but they are often not high priorities for the branches to take up. In order to recruit to a revolutionary organization, our branches often have to orient to a politicized minority, whereas our council office often has to address the immediate needs of specific constituents and a broad electorate who are not always as radicalized or engaged in mass struggles. This is not always the case but sometimes, for example, our council office has to orient toward faith-based groups or non-profits, whereas SA branches are often engaged with activist groups like [Nikkita Oliver's] People's Party and DSA. Sometimes this means that our council office and our branches have to put forward slightly different slogans and demands, even when we are intervening on the same exact issue. There are no easy or universal solutions to these built-in tensions, but they require conscious political discussion and democratic decisions by the elected leadership bodies of the organization.

For those who are newer to the NC, I should make clear I know all of the comrades involved in this dispute extremely well. I think it's fair to say I have worked longer in very close collaboration with Philip, Kshama, and Calvin than probably anyone else. I have been a National Committee member for almost 20 years, I was a National EC member for 14 years, and a Seattle EC member for a time along with Kshama, Calvin, Philip, and Patrick. I was a campaign leader of Kshama's first election campaign in 2012, the Campaign Manager of Kshama's successful 2013 election, and I was the Volunteer Director of Kshama's re-election campaign in 2015. I have worked with Stephan since 2011, especially after he moved to Seattle in 2014. I have supported Philip's work when I felt it benefited the organization and also called Philip out when I felt it was necessary.

When this conflict was first brought to my attention by the EC majority, I was sympathetic to the concerns that Calvin and Bryan K. raised. But after listening to both sides, I was unsure. So I went back and asked to meet with every single EC member on both sides again (except Kshama who I feared was too busy and appeared well represented by the 4 other EC majority members I spoke with). I took notes and systematically asked both sides to address each others' claims and counter-claims. I also had in-depth discussions with a member of the International Secretariat, the one other SEC member, Kailyn, as well as SEC observers Ted and Adam.

I saw from my own experiences in Seattle that Stephan was the Seattle EC member charged with politically leading up the Seattle Party Building Team, and he was helping organize City Committee meetings and weekly Branch Organizers meetings. I understand he attempted to bring the input and demands of the branches into the discussions of the Seattle EC. This contributed to Stephan raising disagreements at times with city council comrades.

My impression is that Kshama found the disagreements with Stephan increasingly frustrating, eventually unbearable, and ultimately refused to work with him. In response, Stephan felt sidelined and excluded from discussions, and tried to push to overcome this situation, but he did so in a frustrated, impatient way.

Alongside the tensions in the *Seattle* EC, political tensions had also developed on the *National* EC over a longer period. After discussing thoroughly with EC members from both sides, after listening to the political debates at the July NC meeting, and after reading the recent exchange of documents, I believe that these tensions stem from the growing pains of transitioning to mass work.

We are in the process of figuring out how to make the transition from advocating basic socialist ideas to seizing the growing opportunities to address a larger audience and, in some cases, develop mass work on a principled revolutionary basis. With the rise of Sanders and Trump, tactical disagreements developed about how to approach the Bernie campaign, the safe states argument, the Trump administration, Sandernistas, DSA, Impeachment, etc. These tensions are perfectly normal. Comrades on both sides say they were able to resolve their different inclinations in a productive, united fashion — until the spring of this year.

The evidence indicates to me that Philip and Stephan were at the forefront of one wing of the EC pushing for a more flexible, tactful approach of united front methods and mass work, which some comrades saw as potentially running the risk of opportunism. The evidence also indicates that another wing of the EC has been more cautious, which other comrades saw as potentially running the risk of conservatism.

These political debates are becoming clearer in the exchange of documents, but they need to be clarified further over the coming period. The NC has a responsibility to clarify and fully grasp these issues which are important.

Approaching Debates Politically, not Personally

Against this background, EC majority comrades developed a viewpoint, with encouragement from the CWI International Secretariat, that Stephan is arrogant and condescending, too adamant in arguing his views, and that he used the Seattle Party-Building Team to maneuver around the council office's priorities.

Do Stephan and Philip argue forcefully for their views? Yes. Is that a crime? No. I have also seen other EC members and International Secretariat members argue forcefully. The CWI points out that Lenin was also regularly criticized for arguing forcefully for his views, even when he was in the minority within the Bolshevik Party.

All comrades acknowledge that Philip and Stephan have talents and political strengths which have contributed to our successes. At the same time, it is clear Philip and Stephan acted too harshly in a few of these debates and were not patient or comradely enough at times.

Both sides report that Philip and Stephan have acknowledged and apologized for these mistakes. It is very unfortunate, in my opinion, that these apologies, which appear to have been genuine attempts to help rebuild relations, have been used by the EC majority as admissions of guilt and opportunities to step up criticisms of Stephan and marginalize him.

I know of one member of the EC majority who has engaged in angry outbursts, yelling and cussing at other Seattle EC members and storming out of meetings numerous times over several years. Twice now this behavior has also been directed at me by this EC majority comrade, unprovoked by me. (I raised this with him, and he apologized.) So there have been "no angels" on either side of this conflict. So it seems imbalanced that the EC majority is focused on only criticizing Philip and Stephan's role in the breakdown of relations.

Disagreements and debates are inevitable as political situations constantly change, which require us to regularly adjust our analyses and tactics. When disagreements inevitably develop, it is important we strive not to take them personally. This can be difficult, but we must demand this especially from National EC members. That's why I don't think it was appropriate that our elected public representative and the EC majority allowed Kshama to refuse to participate in the elected leadership body unless the composition of the body was changed. Our elected officials, no matter who they are, need to work on the leadership bodies we democratically elect them onto.

Unfortunately, it is clear to me that a number of EC majority comrades have reacted very personally to this dispute. I have argued to EC comrades that taking issues personally can cloud their judgement, which is irresponsible and damaging. Nonetheless, Calvin has maintained so far that the criticism of Kshama's refusal to work on the body she was elected onto and demanding that another member is removed as a "very personal issue." But I maintain that comrades need the freedom to be able to raise disagreements within our organization in order to hash out the best decisions together.

If Kshama and the EC majority wanted to change the composition of the Seattle EC, they have the right to advocate for that. But they should have advocated for that openly and transparently. In the EC Majority Reply, the comrades write "In periods of heightened debate within a revolutionary party, leadership changes should come after key discussions and divisions have been clearly aired in the organization, reflecting the balance of opinion in the party." I agree with this. However, the EC asked

the City Committee to elect a new Seattle EC that excluded Stephan, without providing the City Committee the information they needed to make an informed, conscious decision.

We need to be very supportive of Kshama, whose performance is very impressive, despite the extremely difficult nature of the work. So I could accept it if relations between two comrades broke down once or twice to the point where they needed to be separated into different fields of work. But my concern is that there has been a pattern of Kshama and Calvin refusing to work with people they have disagreements with. For example, Kshama refused to participate in the Seattle EC a number of times due to tensions with Jess. Kshama and Calvin also adopted, in my view, an uncollaborative approach towards Patrick who was also a Seattle EC member and later the Seattle City Organizer.

Over the years, I have urged Kshama and Calvin to work together with others when disagreements develop. Now this pattern appears to be continuing. I believe this pattern sheds an important light on the current dispute in which Kshama refused to attend SEC meetings with Stephan.

This is not to minimize Calvin and Kshama's tremendous strengths, which have contributed enormously to our successes. I have tremendous respect and admiration for Kshama and Calvin, which outweigh my criticisms by far. I also recognize the enormous responsibilities and political challenges Kshama faces. But it is precisely because Kshama is under so much pressure that I believe we need to give her the best possible support, assistance, suggestions, and sometimes feedback. We do not want our elected officials or the EC to be surrounded by people who only agree with them, who are not comfortable raising disagreements or giving feedback when necessary.

A Political Shift

Starting this Spring when this conflict erupted, leadership changes were made not only to the Seattle EC, but to two additional leadership bodies:

- (1) Our council strategy team (a sub-committee of the Seattle EC) used to be made up of Kshama, Philip, and Stephan — and later on Kshama, Philip and Ty. In April it was changed by the National EC to Kshama, Philip, Ty, Bryan K., and Calvin — giving the national EC majority control over the body. (However, since May it has not held a meeting.)
- (2) The EC Conveners (an EC sub-committee that convenes EC meetings) used to be made up of Bryan K. and Philip. In July, it was changed to Bryan, Philip and Tom — giving the national EC majority control over the body.

These changes, formally speaking, were relatively minor. But in my opinion they were indicative of a more significant change in the political balance of the EC — a certain shift away from united front methods and principled mass work and back toward a more propagandistic approach.

The EC has the democratic right to organize teams of comrades however they think would be best. But there must be collective discussions of the entire EC followed by majority votes, and changes of leadership teams must be reported to the bodies that elected them. Again, as the EC Majority Reply says "In periods of heightened debate within a revolutionary party, leadership changes should come after key discussions and divisions have been clearly aired in the organization, reflecting the balance of opinion in the party." Shifting the political balance on the National EC could be carried out democratically - as long as it is openly reported to the National Committee and the NC agrees to the shift.

Pressures on Public Representatives

Is Kshama unaccountable and making big mistakes that need to be corrected? Absolutely not. Has she done an outstanding job? Absolutely.

But are there dangers from the huge pressures in city council work? Absolutely.

It is extremely challenging for a revolutionary socialist to act in a principled but skilful way given the power of the mass media, the political establishment, the liberal labor leaders, and the low level of consciousness of workers at this stage. The history of the workers' movement is full of

examples of socialists bending to the power of not just big business but especially other trends in the movement, the liberal left, the labor leaders, identity politics, etc.

Here is one example of the organizational tensions that exist between the priorities of our council work and the priorities of SA which require the Seattle EC to oversee and coordinate all our work, including our council work. The City Committee and our 10 branches discussed and agreed to launch a new campaign “Affordable Seattle” in July. After a few months of door-knocking building up to our big public kick-off, our council office sent out a public email and social media announcement inviting people to another kick-off event that same week for a coalition led by our council office with a very similar name, “Affordable Housing Alliance.” The breakdown in relations and communication on the Seattle EC resulted in our council office mobilizing people to a competing kick-off event for one coalition with an almost identical name as the kick-off event that our branches were launching only two days apart.

Mistakes are understandable and inevitable. But this example illustrates why we need a Seattle EC that has decision-making power over all areas of work: council work, branch work, union work, etc. Each team in our party must work under the direction of our party’s democratically elected leadership, not the other way around.

This important democratic tradition is reflected in the resolutions of the first four Congresses of the Communist International, which the CWI bases itself on. One key resolution was the [“Theses on the Communist Parties and Parliamentarism,”](#) which explains, “Communist members of parliament must subordinate all parliamentary action to the activity of their Party outside parliament... The organization of the parliamentary faction must be completely in the hands of the Central Committee of the Communist Parties.”

In the future, we should insist that leading members, particularly those elected to public office, not be allowed to refuse to work on the leadership bodies we elect them onto without openly convincing a majority of members who elect them why a change is needed.

Comrades argue that less experienced City Committee members would have been demoralized if the EC informed the City Committee about the conflict. But if the issues would have been presented politically all along rather than personally, even less experienced members would not be turned off and demoralized. It would have required the City Committee members to engage with the difficult challenges of balancing council work with branch work and they would begin to learn how to deal with disagreements that inevitably develop.

Moving Forward Together

We could move forward more easily and calmly if concerns like the ones I have raised in this document are addressed politically, without resorting to moral outrage or accusations of malicious or divisive motives. My loyalty to the CWI and SA remains steadfast — as it has for 21 years. I raise these concerns to help all of us clarify what I see as the key sources of the conflict and my views about how we can move forward together, even if we don’t agree on everything.

I will continue to do everything I can to unite the organization and work hard to build SA. At the same time, I have an obligation as a National Committee member to raise concerns when necessary.

I look forward to putting these issues behind us and working with all comrades to build SA together — under the direction of the elected leadership. We need all comrades to come together, on the basis of open, democratic debate over differences, while working in a united fashion to seize the growing opportunities to build SA.

Comradely,

Ramy Khalil, National Committee member and Seattle City Committee member