

A materialist analysis for the Seattle SA structures debate

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(In the document below "SR" refers to Sarah and Ramy's document, and "TJ" refers to Tony and Jeremy's document)

1. The documents by SR and TJ, while each having strengths in various ways, are inadequate in several respects flowing from what I see as errors in methods. I'll start by stating my method.
2. In this document I aim to put forward a materialist analysis of the real problems facing the Seattle organization, which is the main thing I believe that SR and TJ have not adequately addressed as a starting point.
3. From these perspectives on the real material problems SA Seattle has faced, I then draw conclusions about the underlying real causes of these problems based on the broader US and Seattle context, evidence from what I've seen from different SA Seattle members, and the essential character of the various parts of the SA Seattle organization.
4. Flowing from this analysis of problems and their causes, I then put forward some proposals for changes in SA Seattle going forward in order to remedy the causes of the problems.

The real problems SA Seattle has faced

5. The document by TJ describes our problems as follows:

"difficulty in politically consolidating our rapid growth, flowing from this the equally rapid growth of a fulltime apparatus, and the difficulty of devoting sufficient time, energy, and resources to the political development needs of the organization in the midst of mass campaigning work".

They also describe a "conveyor belt process" of decision making, substitutionalism of the work of full-timers that should have been done by branches, too much centralized campaign work, not enough branch and cadre development work, and finally a weakening of the connection between the Council Office and the branches. **In general, the mass of TJ's argument points to problems of too much centralization and not enough branch level work and development.**

6. The document by SR describes our problems as flowing from

"a number of disruptions facing our leadership team and a certain weakening of the Seattle Executive Committee and of the Party-Building Team."

However, I do not see much mention of what those actual problems were that flowed from weak leadership. **In general, the mass of SR's argument points to lots of successes with the current structures, with some agreement on some of the same problems that TJ present, although emphasizing these problems to a much less essential degree (and also of course seeing the problems flowing from different causes).**

7. What is the issue with these analyses? The issue is that these questions of SA internal issues are not real problems in themselves - they are abstract ideas disconnected from reality. A conveyor belt process or low cadre development or a weakening of leadership are abstract characterizations of our organization. What are the concrete effects of a conveyor belt process? Low compared to what? What does weaker mean concretely? There is nothing presented in these documents to tie down these characterizations to reality. For these so-called "problems" to actually be problems, they must be connected to real negative effects on the material impact and political quality of the work of our members who go out and intervene in society. **When we don't impact society and working class people with maximum effect - this is the real material problem. Other so-called "problems" within our organization are only problems to the degree that they have caused the reduced quality of our interventions in society, or that they have caused reduced potential for maximum impact in our future interventions in society.**
8. So what are the real problems SA Seattle has faced? **Have we not achieved the maximum impact in society that we objectively could have achieved? Has the material impact and political quality of our work in Seattle been reduced in the past period?**
9. I think the answer to this is **yes**, and what follows are the real problems as I see them. In the numbers of our paper sales and fundraising, we have clearly fallen short of what we thought was possible in many instances. Our campaigns recently have not had as big of an impact compared to previous work we've done in Seattle, which can often be seen through our paper sales, fundraising, and the amount of working class people we could or could not mobilize to events like at the end of Affordable Seattle this summer. It is clear that our members, especially newer members, have had difficulty when they go out and try to implement our politics in the real world. At citywide meetings, we have heard how members have not been as effective as they wanted to be. In paper sales and other interventions, I have often seen my branch members putting forward political lines that are not the most effective. These are only a few examples of the many ways that we have not had the maximum impact on society that we could have had in the past period.
10. If comrades agree that the above mentioned problems are the real material problems that Seattle SA has encountered in our interventions, then next we must ask: **what are the underlying causes of these problems in our interventions?**

The causes of the problems SA Seattle has faced

11. To me it is clear that there are three reasons for the problems mentioned above. The first two are not very much under our control. The last one is very much under our control and steps should be taken to address it as soon as possible, as I outline in the next section.

12. First of all, our Seattle organization has grown explosively over the past few years, and **newer members who do not know our politics are naturally going to be much less effective at interventions in society**. Political development takes time, and in the meantime new comrades are just going to be less effective than they will be in the future when they have more experience and education. We can't change the fact that cadre-building takes time. However, I agree with SR that our full timers have been extremely effective at building up a new layer of non-full timer leadership that can now lead the branches fairly effectively. It is true that there may have been some partial elements of substitutionalism in the full timers' roles in this regard, but I think this did not cross over into the work being substitutionalist in essence because I think this work was necessary given the really explosive growth we had and the need to build up new leaders without sacrificing the correctness of the political direction of the broader organization.
13. Second of all, **we underestimated the scale of the lull in the anti-Trump movement and movements generally**. I think we set our expectations too high, especially during the summer. It is understandable that we had high expectations coming out of the massive activity earlier in the year, such as the Women's March, and we do not have a crystal ball, so it is impossible to gauge such a rapidly changing situation. But because of the lull in political activity in society, it is natural that our impact was much less than when political activity in society was greater.
14. Third of all, and this is the one that we can really change, **we have not been using our structures in the best way possible to help our members grapple with political questions in order to be more effective at intervening in society**. It is clear from citywide meetings and discussions on BCs, in branches, and in the City Committee that significant sections of rank-and-file members as well as elected leaders have felt that they have not gotten enough chance to discuss and consider and amend the proposals brought by the SEC. **Without full discussion and debate in the SEC, City Committee, and branches with room for meaningful and actionable feedback on our perspectives and proposals, members have not been politically prepared to have the maximum impact when they intervene in society because they have not grappled with the political questions.**

Proposals to remedy the causes of the problems

15. **We need to improve the use of our back-and-forth process of discussion through the different levels of the organization, and I want to emphasize that this process needs to include perspectives as well as proposals**. To this end, I think the documents by TJ and SR are both inadequate, although SR's document comes closer to the needed solution. One issue they both have relates to perspectives. TJ use the word "perspectives" 1 time in their document, while they use the word "proposals" 9 times. SR use the word "perspectives" 3 times in their document, while they use the word "proposals" 24 times. This lack of emphasis on perspectives is worrying. **Without having agreed upon and up-to-date perspectives before proposals for action are brought, there is no way for the City Committee or branches to effectively discuss the upsides and downsides of the proposals.** Without agreed upon perspectives, debates (such as the current debate on Seattle structures) are happening with people talking past each other due to not having agreed upon perspectives of reality.

16. It is crucial that we start discussing and debating perspectives more fully at every level of our organization - the SEC, City Committee, and branches.

17. I think TJ are somewhat correct when they say

"Too often, already fully-developed campaign proposals and initiatives have arrived at the branches via the Party Building Team (PBT), staff meetings, full-timers, and the Branch Organizer meetings. This has resulted in creating the sensation of a "conveyor belt" process as the discussion at recent City Committees has shown."

18. SR's document fails somewhat in that, unlike TJ's document, it does not highlight enough how much we have had an inadequate amount of discussion and grappling throughout the different levels of the organization on our central citywide priorities.

19. However, TJ's solution of more power to branch-level activity does not make sense from their analysis. This would make branches have less, not more, discussion on Seattle perspectives and proposals because they would be more pursuing their individual branch initiatives based on neighborhood perspectives. I think SR are correct in saying that TJ are too focused on branch-level work. Right now in the large majority of cases, the most effective work we can do in Seattle is at the citywide and national levels of political consciousness. There is very little happening at the neighborhood level because people in Seattle generally have very little neighborhood-level consciousness, and also there is very little power at the neighborhood level. In cases where there are important local issues, like at UW for example, the structures are already in place for branches to discuss with the SEC about taking up more local work instead of city-level and national work. Our members need to be grappling primarily with city and national perspectives and city and national proposals. Sometimes this will involve implementing national priorities, like Socialist Students, at a local level like at UW. But still, this involves primarily grappling with national political issues, as we are most effective talking to students about things like how to bring down Trump, or how to fight sexual harassment in the context of a national #MeToo movement.

20. A better solution than more branch power and autonomy is more discussion in branches on centralized city and national perspectives and proposals, with discussion flowing up and down all the levels of the organization as much as possible until a decision is made.

21. SR make very good points about the importance of leadership and the fact that TJ downplay the importance of leadership in their document. SR are at their best when they say

"Elected leadership bodies have a responsibility to brainstorm, draft, debate, and present well thought-out proposals to the membership. That is a big part of what we elect leaders to do. Those who draft proposals should share with the membership the thinking and debate behind the proposal to involve the members and help them take ownership over the process. The membership then has the power to reject, amend, or adopt those proposals. This back-and-forth process of proposals, feedback, criticism, and debate is the best way to come up with the best final product."

22. SR also make a very good point when they say

"Bringing the central political challenges and discussions facing our council office - our key priorities, demands, and messaging - into the City Committee and into the branches for democratic discussion, feedback, debate, and decision-making is the most important way to create collective ownership and improved coordination."

23. However, SR's document is lacking to a certain degree in the need for this back-and-forth process to apply to perspectives as well as proposals.
24. This is the key change that I believe we need to make in our organization in order to be as effective as possible in our interventions going forward: **As much as possible, discussions on both perspectives and proposals should be brought by the SEC to the City Committee, and then through the BOs to the branches for feedback and debate, and then back up to the City Committee and SEC.** This back-and-forth process will help us to refine and improve the perspectives and proposals. **This will allow for the full membership at every level to grapple with the objective reality we are facing and, flowing from that, to then grapple with figuring out the most effective action that we can take to intervene. With a much higher degree of agreement on perspectives throughout the membership, and more debate and discussion on the best way to intervene based on the perspectives, our members will be much better prepared to have the maximum material impact with the highest political quality when they go out into the streets.** This will greatly increase the understanding and collective ownership of our members over the organization and our activities. **As SR mention, this will require a strengthening of the central leadership in order to accomplish this level of discussion in a well-prepared and productive way.** Also, stronger central leadership will be able to conduct this process in a way that makes sure we don't look overly inwards, so that we make key decisions in time for the democratic will to be implemented in action, rather than debating forever until the crucial intervention time has passed.
25. Also, SR are correct that TJ's proposal about the City Council office work points in the direction of less democratic control over the City Council office. In order to be democratically accountable to the membership, the City Council needs to be controlled by the SEC and City Committee. When the City Council office needs the branches to get involved, like in the City Hall campout event, this should be coordinated through the democratically elected and accountable structures of the party, not directly with branches, in order to take into account the broader priorities of the party. SR have good ideas about how to improve the flow of information about the City Council activity to the branches, for example through regular reports.
26. SR have an accurate analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the way we have used targets in Seattle, while TJ overemphasize the problems in the ways we have used targets. However, SR correctly point out that we should improve the balance in our use of targets as a scientific tool in addition to their use as a motivational tool.
27. Finally, SR have made good points about the BO meetings, although individual attention from the PBT to BOs is also important in order to work out branch-specific issues.