

## **For City Committee Discussion: Some Issues Related to the Seattle Organization**

by Tony Wilsdon and Jeremy Prickett

We have been bringing up concerns about the recent campaign proposals through the structures of the Seattle organization over the last few weeks. In this letter we want to open a discussion about some of the challenges which have faced us over the last period and how we think we could better respond to them.

These challenges - 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 - are inevitable for an organization which has passed through the successful work which Seattle SA has in the last few years.

Discussing these challenges and how to better respond to them is a normal and essential part of our understanding of democratic centralism and, if conducted in the correct manner, can greatly strengthen our organization.

We feel we need to take a look at our structures and approaches to party building and discuss how they have shaped up to the tasks. In a revolutionary party, some periods of activity - such as electoral or other important mass campaigns - require a very streamlined form of organization in order to maximize their effectiveness. We feel that in Seattle elements of this streamlined system seem to be left over from the electoral campaigns of a few years ago. We believe this has had a detrimental impact on the development of cadre at the City Committee (CC), Branch Committee (BC), and branch levels.

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.

We should make a special effort to present proposals in a way where comrades learn to grapple with the politics and decision-making, and thus develop their own Marxist skills with the space to take ownership, build the organization, intervene in movements, and argue Marxist tactics in the workplace. We need to build Marxist cadres who can work as part of a genuine collective leadership and who are also able to independently intervene in the class struggle.

***Full-timers***

Another issue linked to this is the role of full-timers. We have developed a substantial full-time team in a short period of time and these comrades play a very important role. However, a large fulltime apparatus always creates a danger of “substitutionalism” - the substituting of the efforts of full-timers for those of an active and engaged membership - which we have to discuss how to avoid. In our opinion the Seattle organization has been run too much through the efforts of full-timers rather than through the branches. In some ways this has become a substitute for the city committee, branches and branch committees to play a leadership role in coming to and implementing decisions.

Socialist Alternative hires comrades to work full time first on a political basis, and this starts with a national and international perspective. While we ask Seattle full-timers to have the starting point of national and citywide priorities and sometimes to take up specific citywide responsibilities, e.g. treasurer, for specific campaigns and to support the council work, their job is not to run the branches.

However, a key role should be to provide political support to the branches. Full-timers should be assigned to work with specific branches, and have regular one-on-one discussions with branch organizers, and a genuine back and forth with BCs, assisting them in taking leadership and ownership of their work. This would include helping the branch committees with decisions and with political development. They should also be providing extra resources to support branch decisions, discussions with members, campaigns, tabling etc. We think we can learn from how CWI branches in large cities internationally function in this regard.

### ***Campaign work***

Our campaign work has been sometimes unbalanced in terms of too great an emphasis on implementing centralized campaigns as compared to not enough emphasis on fully-rounded development of cadre development through that work. The organization has too often moved from one period of intense campaign activity to another, with too much emphasis on centrally driven campaigns without space for branches to lead and develop their own initiatives in those areas of work.

While centralized campaign work is essential for the most effective citywide and national organization, within it we should consciously be emphasizing all related opportunities for political development. This means campaign work should not be overly centralized, and not seen as an end in itself. For example, coalition work within campaigning is an important skill for working within the working class that we need all CC and BC members to get some experience in. For BCs, this means having an active lookout for what local coalitions or campaigns they can

be active in. This can lead to a healthy, and politically consolidating, debate about how to balance national, citywide, and branch priorities.

Campaigning has sometimes meant BC members having had to give up important branch development work in order to meet targets. While targets are an important part of mobilizing comrades for political work, they also need to be presented in a way that does not distort the political work, and where branches grapple with those targets and don't take them as inflexible goals. Targets have often been attached to campaigning work, without corresponding targets for the other important branch-building and cadre development work. This has resulted in active and leading comrades feeling they need to put aside other essential work in order to reach the much publicized campaign targets.

### ***Cadre development***

The key priority adopted by our national organization, after the Ginger campaign, is cadre development. We need to have a great deal more focus on this in Seattle where we exploded to 200 members and 10 branches. We must develop plans to strengthen this work. This includes the newly revived labor caucus with a focus on political development, other caucuses, branch study groups, and to empower the BC members to put a focus on using branch meeting discussions to help develop branch members. This should also mean comrades putting time aside for reading Marxist works as part of their own political development.

Our overall goal is build a base for Marxism in the working class. This is done in no small part at a branch level. Through discussions at the last two CCs we have correctly begun to redirect the emphasis to leave more space for branch initiatives. Digging roots into the workplace and community should be key task for our branches

Another feature of our recent work has been all too often to bypass the City Committee which is the elected leadership of the Seattle organization. By the time decisions come to the City Committee they have been discussed and streamlined through discussions by the PBT, SA staff meeting, and the Branch Organizer meeting. This minimizes the role of the comrades who are elected to the CC. We need to raise the authority and role of the CC and its members in our organization, and in the working class as a whole. Our goal is to have a CC that plays a central role in leading the Seattle organization and that has a living connection to the working class throughout the city and has many members who are recognized as leaders in different communities, campaigns, and workplaces.

### ***Council Work***

Another consequence has been to seriously weaken the important connection between the Council Office and branches. The council office is a critical political asset and organizing tool that belongs to the Seattle branches, and to the national organization. The work we have done through our council position (such as \$15/hour, the Stepping Forward victory, Carl Haglund law, winning \$29M for affordable housing in Build 1,000 Homes) have been key in raising SA's profile, and helped us begin to sink roots, among working class communities, particularly those most active in movements. The link between the council work and Seattle SA branches, through the City Committee, should be greatly strengthened, so that branches can use the council work to further sink serious roots in local working class communities.

Likewise, branches could be a very valuable resource to directly strengthen the council work, and should have a sense of ownership and investment with that work. Branch work would include but not be limited to: mobilization and speaking at key events, working with activists in campaigns around specific demands, and taking the lead in organizing political interventions, like the upcoming People's Budget which can allow the membership closer contact with the work of the council. All of which branches can further use for political development, to develop connections with key allies in their areas, and to use the council seat to win more victories for the working class. The Seattle organization should consider developing a "council coordinator" role, so that each BC/branch identifies a person in their branch to connect with the City Council office, to facilitate a two-way line of communication, and for the purpose of political development, sharing Council-office initiated political proposals with branches, helping mobilize branches to council office-initiated political actions among working-class communities, and instilling a sense of ownership of the council work within the branches.

### ***Importance of branches***

In the CWI, the branch is the basic building block of party democracy and party building. Branches should be decisive in how we conduct our work. The branch committee enables the branch to be focused, brings proposals for discussion, follows up on branch decisions and develops new emerging leaders in whatever work they are involved in. This of course must be done in the context of overall national and citywide priorities.

The citywide structures are there to provide leadership and support for this effort. The CC is elected by our annual conference, and should be the decisive decision-making body on key political priorities and proposals. It should meet more consistently on a monthly basis, or more often as needed.

The SEC is elected by the CC to help politically lead the work and to take necessary timely day-to-day decisions, to develop new proposals, to support the work of the branches, to bring a city-wide view to our work and help prioritize our work based on decisions taken by the CC. It is also responsible for convening CC meetings, help prepare the agenda and present clear proposals for discussion, debate and decision by the CC. It also should present for discussion other proposals sent by CC members, branches and BCs for discussion at the CC.

### ***Looking Forward***

Clearly, during elections we needed a streamlined organization that can organize a disciplined campaign. We will need to reemphasize central structures in 2019 to re-elect Kshama. But even then, we must balance the role of the branches. It should be clarified that the organizing is bending the stick towards more centralized structure on a temporary basis, and only as needed.

An essential process has to be a sharper focus on political development. This primarily occurs at the branch and BC level. This needs to be through one-on-one discussions and study groups based on branches or sometimes a couple of nearby branches. BC members can gain excellent experience by leading study groups. Also, as at present, emerging leaders should be invited to attend and participate in CC meetings to further enable their development.

Because we have grown so fast in Seattle, and just moved to 10 branches, there is special need to politically develop Branch Organizers, many of whom are very new members. The Branch Organizer meeting should be restructured to primarily focus on political development. A smaller part of the meetings should provide space for an interactive process on branch building, strategies, etc. Lastly, weekly Branch Organizer meetings are both time-consuming and by meeting every week do not allow enough space for comrades to develop. We should consider holding them no more than every other week, allowing time instead for one-on-one discussions between branch organizers and branch-assigned full-timers, and shifting emphasis toward BCs and branches taking more ownership of campaign work and political development in the Seattle organization.