

Proposal for consideration: strengthen SEC report-backs to the CC

Proposal

For the coming six months, the Seattle Executive Committee (SEC) will commit to expanding the scope and detail of report-backs on discussions and debates on the SEC to the City Committee (CC) at each CC meeting. These report-backs will include information not just about final positions the SEC has decided on, but about the process and debates that led to those decisions, including information such as:

- Major proposals considered
- Key information that factors into local perspectives
- Summaries of major debates on the SEC
- Vote outcomes on major decisions
- Changes to SEC attendance and membership

Under democratic centralism, the SEC has the authority to use its judgment on what to report to the CC, including some issues which shouldn't be immediately disclosed to the CC -- but the SEC commits to shifting the overall balance to more transparency in the coming period.

Context

Like all structural questions within democratic centralism, this proposal needs to be weighed in the context of the immediate and medium-term needs of the organization; not one-size-fits all for every situation. As Justin B put forward very well, our structures mainly have to flow from what our upcoming tasks are going to be. Our organization is currently seeing intense debates, and often extremely unhealthy processes for these debates.

Although our organization has done some incredible work over the past year, our effectiveness has been greatly reduced by the internal national and local leadership crisis. The CC is now tasked with weighing in on this crisis, but without the proper tools to do so. Going forward, the CC should have an ongoing view of what the SEC is considering and debating. We can't be a meaningful body if we are only given competing narratives of a debate without any information to hold them up against.

This proposal is not meant to stand alone. To truly raise the political level of the CC, foster ongoing discussion to lead us to the best way forward, and put the CC in a better position to hold its leadership accountable, this proposal should be paired with other changes including:

- More thoroughly bringing local perspectives to the CC
- The CC meeting at least monthly in the coming period
 - And more frequently whenever necessary (a practice we have already adopted in the last few months, with the exception of the cancelled December CC meeting)
 - Using pooled funds to cover comrades who have to take time off work.

What is the function of the City Committee?

Two of the central functions of the CC are to:

1. Elect an SEC to lead the organization on a day-to-day basis

2. Be a body of meaningful political debate about national and local perspectives and our plans and priorities within that political context.

The selection of the SEC takes into account both the need for a slate of people that work well together, and a body with the highest political level with the appropriate political tensions to ensure that we come to balanced plans of action. It is our practice that the outgoing SEC presents a recommended slate to the CC. On what basis should the CC members consider this recommendation, if they have little information about those members' perspectives and actions? In reality, the only way we can fulfill our democratic role in the organization is by knowing at least a broad outline of the political viewpoints and tendencies within the SEC. These tendencies have not adequately been made clear in discussion in the CC, where proposals are often presented either as fully agreed on by the SEC, not at all, or in an ambiguous manner where it's unclear if the proposal is from an individual or the SEC as a whole.

For the CC to be a place where meaningful discussion and decisions take place, we need to have discussion while it is still relevant. This means the SEC should bring proposals to the CC with adequate time to decide on proposals in response to changing political events, even if the SEC hasn't reached agreement.

Our practice of having the SEC submit concrete and well-formed proposals to the CC is helpful and is the best basis for consideration about whether to take them up. But the CC needs to have a more solid basis for evaluating those proposals. The CC has grown and developed in the past year, and has sharpened its capacity for political debate and decision-making under the guidance of the SEC on what we should and shouldn't focus on in our discussions. Now, to help the CC continue growing, and to strengthen its ability to hold the SEC accountable, the SEC needs to provide the CC with more information about its debates and how it reached decisions.

The leadership crisis has proven the need for SEC reports

In my experience, the leadership crisis has proven the need for more thorough, consistent, timely, and explicit reporting from the SEC to the CC.

When I was first made aware of the leadership crisis in July 2017, it was a shock to me. I hadn't yet heard of any strong political disagreement on either the SEC or National Executive Committee (EC), even though I have been attending the CC for two years, have been an elected member for almost a year, and have been regularly attending the National Committee (NC). Since then, despite an extremely serious attempt to find answers, I have been given incredibly different accounts from each member of the SEC and NC that I've met with, with some insisting that the crisis is purely interpersonal, others emphasizing organizational differences and violations, others claiming that there are ongoing and deep (if not 100% consistent) political trends, and others denying that those political trends exist. I have also been told by some SEC members that there are serious conflicts on the SEC that are being withheld from the CC, while other SEC members have said that everything is out on the table. Those are contradictory statements, and without some form of reporting, I have little basis on which to decide which one is correct.

As an example, the EC Majority letter, which I first read a couple months ago, included some very useful political analysis and debate. But it also included a huge amount of he-said-she-said, some of which has been denied by the members it refers to. The CC was not aware of these political disagreements until after the SEC made significant changes to its organization (such as changes to Stephan, Philip, and Kshama's involvement). This means it was impossible for the CC to play any real role holding the SEC accountable. Moving forward, the CC needs to have a clearer picture of things as they are developing if it is to play a meaningful political role.

Reports/minutes are not a cure-all

Getting reports from the SEC to the CC will not in any way be a cure-all. We have often emphasized that getting minutes from leading bodies doesn't actually ensure democracy; what's most important is consistent democratic discussion and debate and the right to vote on those discussions.

The CC does not need to know every point the SEC discusses; this would negate the reason for having the SEC as a separate body in the first place. The SEC, correctly, in its day-to-day business may discuss issues that are either too mundane or too sensitive to report back to the broader CC membership. However, when there is an ongoing, political debate, which has major ramifications for the rest of the city and is affecting the citywide work in real ways, it is the responsibility of the SEC to report this back to the body it's accountable to.

This proposal is not about fetishizing procedure. Democratic centralism provides great amounts of flexibility in how we are structured, including giving the EC the right to change the makeup of the SEC without the CC understanding fully the basis for this decision. But it doesn't mean that that's what the current situation has called for. In reality there should have been an emergency NC much sooner, and the internal crisis should have been brought much sooner to the CC after the NC met. There is no procedural fix that would solve the crisis. However, strengthening reporting from the SEC -- at least in the coming six months -- can provide the basis for substantive discussion and deliberation to lead the organization to overcome it.

I would greatly appreciate feedback from both the SEC and CC on what would be the best format for these reports.

Comradely,
Rebekah