

Response to the Letters sent to the NC on 1/21/18

By Philip L and Stephan K, EC members

January 24, 2018

1. Following the discussions at the December meetings of the CWI International Executive Committee and the SA National Committee about the debates in the SA leadership, we hoped that, regardless of whatever disagreements existed, we could move forward in a new and positive fashion in collaboration to build SA and work to begin to overcome the divisions that had regrettably developed in our leadership. We registered the concerns raised about us and take them very seriously. We will continue to reflect on how things unfolded over the last year, on owning our mistakes, not to get defensive about them and work to help the organization to move forward. At the same time, we understood that the organization sees no basis for ongoing faction divisions and also the majority would be asked not to act in a factional way. Unfortunately, we think the majority of the Executive Committee has not acted in this way.
2. We believe we need to write to the National Committee and the Seattle City Committee to register our views in response to the three documents Bryan K sent to the NC on January 21. These documents were sent out without the democratic agreement of the EC. They contain one-sided, incomplete information, and inaccuracies. All three documents were then forwarded by Ty M to the Seattle City Committee members and observers.
3. The first document "Letter from EC + Next Phone NC," signed "Bryan K, for the EC," was not voted on or formally agreed by the EC. We proposed to the EC before it was sent out an amendment to this letter. The amendment was to inform the NC of a minority viewpoint on the EC regarding the recent decisions to lay off Freeman and Whitney. This amendment was to add one sentence "*A minority of the EC thinks that, before laying off full-timers, we should have had a full discussion about other areas of work that we need and can finance full-timers for, such as the the defense campaign against lawsuits.*" (We proposed adding this sentence to the end of the fourth paragraph which starts with "With the pressures of our national finances.")
4. Bryan K responded to this by writing to the EC "I don't think this proposed change accurately reflects the balance of the discussion surrounding Whitney's changed role. I will send out the EC letter without the proposed change and also the material from Whitney and Adam to the NC." Following that Bryan K immediately sent the letter to the NC "for the EC."
5. We agree that the balance of opinion of the EC, i.e. the majority of the EC, does not agree with the our view that, before laying off full-timers, the EC "*should have had a full discussion about other areas of work that we need and can finance full-timers for, such as the the defense campaign against lawsuits.*" Our amendment did not claim that. Our amendment was to inform the NC that a *minority of the EC* has this view.
6. The EC, through majority votes, has every right to take decisions. This includes deciding to lay off Freeman and Whitney. A minority of the EC also has the right to disagree with those decisions and have their minority viewpoint reported to the NC. A majority has the obligation to allow a minority to have its viewpoints heard within the organization.

Inaccuracy

7. The EC took its decision to lay off Whitney on December 15, 2017. This was only eight days after it had received Adam's first letter - not five weeks later as Bryan's introduction and the dating of Adam's letter in the document sent out gives the impression of.
8. The date given for Adam's first letter is incorrectly dated November 7, 2017 in the document sent to the NC and Seattle City Committee. Bryan K's introduction to Adam's letters inaccurately repeats this, saying "the decision not to renew Whitney Kahn's part-time position in the council office in 2018 ... was agreed on by the EC in December 2017. The first letter [from Adam] was emailed to the EC on November 7, explaining in brief the need to make a change to city council staffing and to not renew Whitney's position."
9. In fact Adam's first letter was sent out one month later on December 7, 2017, in the heat of the internal debates that were taking place a few days after the IEC and two days before the start of the December NC meeting.

Termination of Whitney's Employment

10. Adam sent his second letter to the EC on January 21, further explaining the reasoning for terminating Whitney's employment. Bryan K sent it to the NC (and then Ty sent it on to the Seattle City Committee and observers). Does the majority of the EC agree with Adam's letter? Is it only Adam's personal opinion? Unfortunately, the statement sent out by Bryan gives no indication.
11. But it was the EC, not Adam, who took the decision to terminate Whitney's work in the Council office, and the decision to end his employment with SA as well. (Whitney worked as a SA Seattle full-timer starting in December 2014, and since May 2016 part-time for SA and part-time for the Council office).
12. For our part, we have questions about some of the claims Adam makes in his second letter. Furthermore we believe parts of Adam's second letter will unfortunately raise even further doubts and concerns that Whitney was fired because he raised questions and criticisms about aspects of Kshama's work.
13. For example, Adam in his January 21 letter explaining the reasoning for the Whitney's termination says "Most disturbingly, the idea that Kshama or the council office is unaccountable and abuses authority, and the use of AHA and the Harris-Talley vote as supposed examples of that, have been spreading in the Seattle organization. This seems to me a particularly damaging and dangerous outcome of the present internal crisis in Seattle SA." Adam also criticizes Whitney for having the view that "the council office formed AHA, organized the People's Budget, or focused on the stop the sweeps demand in an undemocratic way."
14. Whitney can explain his views about the accuracy (or lack thereof) of these claims. But Adam cites Whitney's supposed views (which echo the "most disturbing" criticisms of Kshama that "have been spreading in the Seattle organization") as one of the reasons Whitney should not continue working in the Council office. This adds further weight to Whitney's contention that he was fired for raising questions and criticisms of the council work - exactly what the EC Majority has so vigorously denied.

15. Whitney as a SA member and an elected member of the Seattle City Committee has every right to hold such views and, if so, would have an obligation to raise his criticisms through the structures of the organization. His political rights and obligations were not eliminated when he started working in the Council office or for SA. It is essential for the democratic integrity of SA that all members and full-timers feel completely free to raise questions or disagreements through the structures of the organization.
16. A full-timer must carry out the decisions of the organization and carry out the work that is assigned to them, regardless of which views they hold. At the same time, they also have a duty to raise their political views through the structures of the organization in a constructive fashion. It is incumbent on the EC, in our view, to go out of its way to remove any suspicion that full-timers face retaliation if they raise criticisms of our public representative or the majority positions of the SA leadership.

Discussions with NC Observers

17. Bryan K states in his introduction to the letters by Adam: “The second, more detailed letter was sent by Adam to the EC on January 21 in response to Whitney’s request for further information on the decision and to a very serious charge made by EC member Stephan Kimmerle in conversations with Seattle NC observers that the decision represents a ‘firing’ of Whitney as ‘political retaliation.’”
18. Bryan’s introduction to Adam’s letters was never circulated to the EC or agreed by the EC. Nor did Bryan inform the EC he would be writing an introduction. EC members did not have any opportunity to raise questions, clarifications, concerns, or amendments before it was sent to the NC and Seattle City Committee.
19. The EC agreed at its December 15, 2017 meeting that NC members could discuss the closed “EC Report” session of the NC with the invited NC observers. This was communicated to the NC by Bryan K in a message on December 15. This was almost nine months after the crisis in the SA leadership had broken out. During those nine months the EC would not allow us to discuss the crisis with the NC observers or other members who are not on the NC, a decision we criticized but respected. In contrast, the EC Majority has not respected this decision to not speak with members outside of the NC about the crisis.
20. Following the EC decision to allow comrades to discuss the “EC Report” session of the NC with NC observers, Stephan had discussions with NC observers in Seattle. Stephan told the comrades who he discussed with that he was in a minority at the IEC and NC, and urged the comrades to speak with EC members from the majority to hear both viewpoints. The full NC material was made available to NC observers to read and judge for themselves. Most of the material was later on also made available to the Seattle City Committee members and observers by the EC (though the majority of the EC refused Philip and Stephan’s request for all the documents to be circulated to the Seattle City Committee).
21. Stephan had every right to speak about all aspects of the crisis, including the fear of political retaliation, and state his views about it. Patrick, Ty and Kailyn already mentioned their fear of this in their letter to the IEC which was circulated to the NC. They wrote, “at this moment it seems the EC majority, the stronger side in this escalating crisis, appears prepared to force through a resolution on its own terms, driving minority comrades out of leadership, out of full-time positions, and other measures to marginalise their influence. Majority comrades have said that they believe things are heading toward a split and this seems to be informing their uncompromising approach.” (We were

informed that Ty and Kailyn recently withdrew that document.)

22. This concern was also alluded to in Patrick's resolution to the NC (which he subsequently withdrew) when it said the EC should "reach mutually acceptable agreement on the immediate organizational issues posed, including at least ... hiring, firing, and roles of full-timers." At the December NC discussion, EC Majority comrades criticized this part of Patrick's resolution. This demonstrates further that concerns about firings of full-timers was an issue that the NC was aware of, and relevant to include in discussions with NC observers. This was even more relevant after the NC meeting when the EC terminated Whitney's employment, a move that Stephan believed confirmed the fears of such measures that had been part of the NC discussion.
23. These concerns were also openly raised on the EC before the EC made its decision to terminate Whitney's employment. The EC first discussed the proposal to terminate Whitney's employment on December 8, 2017, the day after Adam's first letter was sent to the EC.
24. Philip raised in that EC discussion that he hoped that Kshama had properly discussed the criticisms of Whitney's work with him in order to hear what Whitney had to say, and to give him feedback, with the opportunity to overcome problems. Philip also stated that he agreed that Kshama needs a team in her office that worked for her, but it is essential that any staffing changes be done in a way that does not in any way give an impression that Whitney was facing retaliation for raising questions or disagreements with aspects of the council work. Philip proposed clearly to the EC that this could be achieved by keeping Whitney as a SA full-timer even if he did not continue working part-time for the Council office. Philip argued that transferring Whitney from part-time council work (and part-time SA work) to full-time SA work would avoid any possible perception that raising questions or disagreements is not welcome.
25. Finally, Philip raised at the December 8th EC meeting that, before we lay off any full-timers, we should decide if we are going to hire full-timers for the defense campaign against the lawsuits (which would be able to finance itself). At that EC meeting Ty also raised that, before we decide on the composition of the 5 full-timers focused on the Seattle work, we should know who was being considered to replace Whitney in the Council office. (For example, would it be one of the current Seattle full-timers?) These ideas were never properly explored or discussed before Whitney and Freeman's employment were terminated.
26. If the majority of the EC does not agree with a minority, the majority has the right to implement its decisions -- after collective discussions and votes. But that does not eliminate the right of a minority to raise its views internally in the organization, particularly after raising the concerns openly with the EC. The Minority has every right to discuss these issues with the NC members and observers who the EC agreed we could discuss the EC Report session from the NC meeting with.

"Request for Further Information"?

27. Bryan's introduction to Adam's letters says "the second, more detailed letter was sent by Adam to the EC on January 21 in response to Whitney's request for further information on the decision and to a very serious charge made by EC member Stephan Kimmerle in conversations with Seattle NC observers that the decision represents a "firing" of Whitney as "political retaliation."

28. This account gives the impression that Whitney was only asking for “further information on the decision,” while it was the “EC member Stephan Kimmerle” who had raised that “the decision represents a ‘firing’ of Whitney as ‘political retaliation.’”
29. In fact Whitney says in his letter “I believe I was fired by the EC as part of the factional debate, and for raising political questions.” Whitney also writes “This is a dangerous precedent which can have a chilling effect on our internal democracy, especially on other full-timers who might fear if they raise questions or criticisms they will also be fired ... This chilling effect can be damaging even if there is merely the perception that full-timers are fired for having political disagreements ... Any impression that the organization is using such methods of retaliation for raising political concerns ... has a profound chilling effect on our internal democracy.”
30. As comrades can see, it is not only Stephan who criticized the EC’s decision to “fire” Whitney or raised it was done out of “retaliation” for Whitney “raising political concerns.” Nor is it just Whitney, Stephan and Philip who have these criticisms.
31. It is also not accurate to give the impression that Whitney was only asking for “further information on the decision.” His letter is quite clear: “If my lay-off is to be discussed with the National Committee, or if the NC Closed Session or my lay-off is to be reported to the City Committee, it’s at that time that I ask that this document be circulated to the relevant body so that comrades can read it, hear both sides, and make their own independent assessment.”
32. In conclusion, we believe a number of aspects of how this affair was handled continues the undemocratic policy of “locking out” Philip and Stephan from meaningful participation on the EC as Bryan K described it at the December 2017 CWI International Executive Committee meeting. This is not a policy to build a collective leadership, to respect minority views, or to work to overcome the unnecessary divisions in our leadership. It is also a concerning continuation of the pattern of removing comrades from leadership bodies or from areas of work if they express disagreements with our public representative. When our public representative developed political disagreements with Jess, Patrick, Stephan, Philip, and now Whitney, she and another EC member, Calvin, either cut off working relationships with them or developed an uncooperative approach toward them.
33. As our organization grows and increasingly engages in mass work, we will inevitably have more internal debates and disagreements about our analysis of the political situation and the best tactics. We need a democratic atmosphere inside our organization where comrades can raise questions and disagreements with each other, which will help us hash out the best analyses and tactics together. We urge comrades to restart work in a spirit of solidarity and democracy. We are committed to build this organization and will do everything we can to help overcome the internal challenges facing SA.