

BUILDING THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST GI MOVEMENT

Statement and Proposal

by the

National Office

Vietnam Veterans Against the War/Winter Soldier Organization

For the National GI Conference - Chicago - October 11 - 14, 1974

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I. The World Situation - Today the world situation is clearly characterized as being in a period of great turmoil. Far from being a bad thing, this is a good thing: a sign of the approaching victory of the people's struggles all around the world for independence, freedom and an end to all forms of oppression. This situation has developed from, and correspondingly adds to, the deepening worldwide crisis facing US imperialism. Major realignments of forces have developed with incredible rapidity in the past few years as US imperialism has suffered one defeat after another at the hands of liberation struggles all over the world. Nor is this crisis of imperialism isolated to the struggles of Third World people for independence and an end to colonialism and neo-colonialism. It has also resulted in a burgeoning anti-imperialist movement among the people living inside the US.

II. The Situation in the US - As imperialism is defeated, step-by-step, it is increasingly forced to try and place the burden of its crisis on the backs of the American people. But whatever form it may take, attacks on workers' living conditions, political repression, national oppression, inflation, etc., one thing is clear: people in the US are fighting back against imperialism. The American people are rapidly learning that their interests and the interests of the corporate system that our government is controlled by have absolutely nothing in common. One need only look at the rising workers struggles, the growing struggle against national oppression, the anti-war movement, the women's movement, the veterans' movement or the GI movement to see evidence of this resistance. Repression breeds resistance! And the case of the US is certainly no exception.

III. Preface to the National GI Conference - VVAW/WSO sees the holding of this National GI Conference, the first such gathering in over two years, as being an important step in furthering the development of this overall anti-imperialist movement. Clearly, the building of a strong anti-imperialist GI movement must be seen as one of the priorities for progressive forces in the US. This conference provides us with an excellent opportunity for doing just this. By summing up and sharing the practice and experience of the past few years of the GI movement, we will hopefully be able to collectively arrive at some of the basic lessons or conclusions to be drawn from that practice. These lessons in turn must be used to guide our future action - to broaden and deepen our work with the GI movement. Unless we can learn the lessons of our own history, we can never hope to achieve any real progress.

Just as all things in our world are in a constant state of change and motion, so are the conditions affecting the nature of the work we must be doing in the GI movement. Particularly at this point in time when conditions in the world are changing so fast, it is both a necessity and our responsibility to continually sum up and re-analyze and improve our work. We sincerely hope that this conference will make a significant contribution to that end. Finally, as was stated in the original call for the conference, we hope that the experience of coming together and sharing our varying experience and outlooks on the GI movement will begin the process of building a much deeper sense of unity within the GI movement. Certainly the greater the unity we can achieve within the GI movement, the greater our success will be.

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IV. The Role of the Military under Imperialism - Primary Any understanding of the GI movement and of the necessity for building a strong anti-imperialist GI movement, is an understanding of the role that the military plays under imperialism and the special oppression that GIs face under it. The military is a primary tool of imperialism, both at home and abroad. Its ultimate purpose is to serve the interests of the monopoly capitalists that run the US. Its very nature dictates that it can serve no other interests in the long run. Here in the US the military is fully prepared, and trained, to act as a strikebreaking force or to back up local police forces in the event of 'civil disturbances'. It remains equally ready to implement US 'foreign policy' abroad or to underwrite US-backed dictatorships. Our experiences with the war in Indochina have provided us all with a classic demonstration of what the real role of the military is and who's interests it serves.

V. The Oppression of GIs - As well as the role that the military plays under imperialism, there is also an internal contradiction within the military between the class interests of GIs and the role into which they are forced by the class which controls the military. Not only are they used as the human cannon fodder for imperialism's military adventures, such as the war in Indochina, but they are also subjected to a system that degrades and dehumanizes them. To start with, most GIs are forced into the military on the basis of their class position and race. If they aren't forced into the military by the draft, they are forced in by the gun of economic necessity held to their heads. Once in, GIs are not only divided from the rest of the working class and directly set against it, but they are similarly divided from each other through an adroit fostering of national oppression and male supremacy.

Unlike most jobs in civilian society, GIs are prohibited from either striking or quitting; instead they face heavy repression and harassment from the brass for the slightest sign of resistance to military rule. Working and living conditions are deplorable, unsafe and dehumanizing; yet fighting to improve them lands one in the clutches of the military's medieval judicial system, the UCMJ. Under it, GIs are not given the slightest pretense of anything remotely resembling justice. Whether it comes from an actual court martial or results from the system of non-judicial punishment it all means the same thing: GIs have no real rights under military law. But whether it is racism, bad working and living conditions, the UCMJ or the oppression of women, it all adds up to the specific ways GIs are oppressed by imperialism while they are in the military. And it is this very real, concrete basis of oppression under imperialism that provides the material basis for organizing GIs to fight back.

VI. The Need for Building an Anti-Imperialist GI Movement - Imperialism dictates the role that the military will play, and as long as the system of US imperialism remains intact, the military will continue to be used against people all over the world; and it will continue to oppress the GIs who are forced into it. The role of the military then, and the oppression that it breeds, calls for a fighting movement of GIs who can both combat their own oppression and the imperialist system they are forced to serve. Further, given the history of the GI movement, from the resistance to the war in Indochina to struggles such as those of the Iwakuni Five, the USS MIDWAY or the USS LITTLE ROCK, there is a clear mandate to show that GIs not only can be organized, but that they must be organized. Spontaneous resistance to the military by GIs occurs almost on a daily basis. GIs are ready to join, and build, the worldwide anti-imperialist movement and it is the duty of all progressive forces in the US to do all they can to build the anti-imperialist GI movement.

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VII. The Current Status of the GI Movement - What then is the current status of the existing GI movement? With the exception of a few projects, the energy level of conscious organization is very sporadic and its involvement with the larger anti-imperialist movement

is very limited. Historically there has been a serious lack of both political and programmatic unity among the GI movement. (There has also been a lack of structural unity, which should be seen as one of the highest expressions of true political unity.) There has also been a real lack of understanding of the need for a fighting anti-imperialist GI movement among other progressive forces on the left, which has similarly held the struggle back. Certainly the end of a direct combat role in Indochina for hundreds of thousands of American GIs had a profound effect on the status of the GI movement.

For the time being at least, people are not being drafted, and there are no longer 500,000 GIs in Indochina. There are also no longer the dozens of GI projects, GI papers and GI organizers that once used to flourish near US military bases all over the country. Undoubtedly much of this is the direct result of the changing material conditions facing GI organizers today. However, while the strategy of the military and its direct intervention abroad has changed, the GI movement did not reflect an understanding of that change in its organizing strategy. What does remain are most of the same miserable conditions of military life that GIs have faced for years - potential cannon fodder in wars of aggression; national oppression, harassment from the brass, poor working and living conditions, oppression of women, brutality in military prisons and the UCMJ. And as the crisis of imperialism deepens, these conditions within the military will worsen.

Moreover, the ongoing lessons of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have not been lost on the American people or American GIs. There is a rapidly growing awareness of what US imperialism is all about. While there may not be the mass revolts of 1971 and Firebase Pace, there is today a much deeper and more profound understanding of the nature of the system of imperialism. It is on this growing awareness that a new and stronger GI movement must be built. That and other aspects of the new conditions in the military, such as the emergence of women as a prominent part of the new 'volunteer military' must be analyzed and turned to the advantage of the anti-imperialist movement.

VIII. Style of Work - 1) In looking at these changing conditions and formulating our work for the coming period, it is also important to take into account the changing level of struggle in the US as reflected in the growth of not only anti-imperialist consciousness but many anti-imperialist organizations as well. This growing anti-imperialist movement is a political development which should affect our whole outlook towards GIs. We should not see our work among GIs, or anyone else for that matter, in isolation from other struggles taking place today in the US and throughout the world. Rather, we should look at GI organizing as one important part of a much larger struggle against US imperialism. And we should always be striving to link these various components of the struggle together. This is an essential key to any real success in our work. Tendencies to make very narrow formulations on GI work should be thoroughly combated. In reality such isolation cannot but hold the struggle back.

2) In carrying out our daily work with GIs, we feel that the most important aspect of that work is its anti-imperialist content. Whatever the problem we are faced with, whether it is homeporting or hair regulations, we should always be striving to explain how that problem fits into the overall struggle against imperialism. Exposing the nature of imperialism - and summing up the common experience of GIs as victims of imperialism - is at the essence of successful local political work. Without providing an anti-imperialist perspective on local work, and without linking this with the day-to-day struggles GIs are waging, we will be failing to identify the real cause of these problems and, objectively, holding back the struggle. We cannot deal with one symptom of imperialism after another without exposing how it is just another manifestation or 'side effect' of the basic illness. As long as the basic problem remains, the 'symptoms' -

aggressive wars, racism, oppression and so forth - will continue. It is in the very nature of the beast that this is so. Anything less than a basic anti-imperialist analysis to guide our political work with GIs will be inadequate. Anti-imperialism must be at the very heart of the GI movement.

3) Our style of work in the GI movement, besides providing an anti-imperialist analysis, must be viewed from the point of view of conscious leadership - leadership that serves a vanguard role of always being out front showing the best possible way to carry the struggle forward - leadership that is continually trying to initiate action to organize GIs to fight back. This is certainly not to say that the GI movement should then ignore the spontaneous resistance of GIs that we see cropping up daily. Rather, we should always be prepared to go to these struggles and do all possible to broaden and deepen them, constantly striving to inject as much political content into them as possible. But to passively wait for spontaneous action by GIs to occur before GI movement organizers become involved is definitely not leading, but tailing behind uncertainty and spontaneity. At times the GI movement has had aspects of such an approach to GI organizing, as do people still today; but clearly this error is only liquidating the need for conscious leadership. We see that the exact opposite, more conscious leadership, is what is really needed. We should always be searching for ways to initiate action and put the GI movement on the offensive at the very onset of our work.

4) A cardinal principle in all our GI work should be an orientation towards building a fighting GI movement. Above all, the GI movement must be based on, and its strategy derived from, the understanding that its primary strength is the united, militant, mass action of GIs. If we fail to realize this and instead rely on external factors - the military system, courts, etc. - we will inevitably make major errors in our work and fall into reformism. However, if we base all our actions on our primary strength, the people, we will be able to win real victories. We will be determining our own initiative rather than continually reacting to the initiative of the military. Basing ourselves on the people and understanding that we can never win if we try to work through the system, our whole organizing goal then is to organize GIs to **FIGHT BACK** against imperialism. We do want to expose imperialism to GIs, linking up how it oppresses them as well as people all over the world. But this is not enough. We aren't interested in just shining a light in the face of imperialism to show everybody what an ugly monster it is - but rather to organize them to fight back against it - to ultimately wring its bloody neck! Unless we build a fighting movement that will consciously address itself to actively fighting back against the system we can never expect to get anywhere. But if we truly understand what our primary strength is - the united, militant action of GIs fighting back against imperialism - then we can expect to win real victories, not just meaningless concessions.

IX. Problems Existing in the GI Movement - In building a fighting anti-imperialist GI movement it is essential to avoid what we consider to be one of the main shortcomings of the GI movement in the past, which is the tendency to look upon GI work as a service project. Hopefully what has already been said in this paper will have explained the rationale for struggling against seeing GI work as a service project. If we agree that the nature of imperialism can never be mitigated, improved or reformed; and that it is now facing an ever growing crisis necessitating ever more desperate and barbaric actions; then we can clearly see that we will be doing nobody any real 'service' by trying to merely numb the pain caused GIs by imperialism with a little service or assistance. If the tooth is rotten it must be pulled. The only real service we can provide GIs, and the rest of the American people, is by actively working to end imperialism once and for all.

But even given agreement on this basic formulation there is still a danger of unconsciously falling into a service mentality. Particularly with work around the UCMJ this is a danger. Obviously legal counseling, a service, is an important component part of any GI work. An understanding of the government's rules - what can be done within the limits of the system - is always a valuable tool. But in the final analysis this understanding can only be a tool to be used in our work; one tactic among many to be selected as dictated by the specific conditions of a given situation. It must not, however, be raised to an organizing strategy in and of itself. The only real motivating force which can carry the struggle of GIs forward and make it meaningful politically will be a thorough political understanding of imperialism and the military's role under it, and the mass action of GIs directed against it. There is a qualitative difference between tools or tactics and an overall strategy. The strategy should be to build a fighting anti-imperialist mass movement in the military. Within that strategy of course there is always the need for many different tactics depending on the situation, but we cannot allow a tactic such as counseling be raised to the level of a strategy.

2) Another problem which has long been a characteristic of the GI movement, which we think needs to be struggled against, is the attitude of individualism among many projects. In some cases it seems to have been raised to the level of a principle. The specific fact of whether or not a given project is independent or part of a larger organization is not what is at issue here. Rather, it is the approach to GI organizing as it relates to the rest of the movement of progressive forces in the US that we are talking about. We cannot allow ourselves to view the GI movement as a unique or special case that has little if any direct tie-in to the rest of the movement. This would inevitably weaken the GI movement and the larger struggle as well. It objectively digs a little burrow for the GI movement to crawl into and dig its way along in total isolation from anything else. Linking up the GI movement with the struggles of other sections of the population must be an essential part of our work. We cannot see any struggle in isolation; we are all fighting against the same system and it should be of primary importance to see that these struggles are brought closer together. The struggles of workers, oppressed nationalities, women, students, etc. are important and inseparable from our own work.

3) Individualism; attitudes of 'our project is sacred' and must be independent of all other political activity; concepts of GI organizing as being a service; failure to adjust to the changing material conditions facing the GI movement; have all contributed their share towards creating perhaps the basic problem facing us today: a lack of meaningful unity within the GI movement. Whatever the specific reasons may be, it is vital for us to realize that the period in our history when we can afford such a 'luxury' is over. The responsibilities of our task simply do not permit it.

There are no longer projects at hundreds of military installations; there are no longer dozens of movement people in every major city that are eager to do GI work; there are no longer such fountainheads of economic substance like USSF to support projects all over the country. But even with these conditions, we are still charged with building ever-increasing unity within the GI movement. Our goal is to constantly be forging ahead with our work and not to be content with the status quo. With the deepening crisis of US imperialism, with the changing conditions existing within the military, and with the growth of a much more mature anti-imperialist movement in the US, it is time to chart our course for the coming period on the basis of these new conditions and new tasks presented us. We firmly believe that these new conditions demand the closest possible coordination between all GI organizing and the development of strong, national organizational forms to implement that work. We realize that this will be a long and

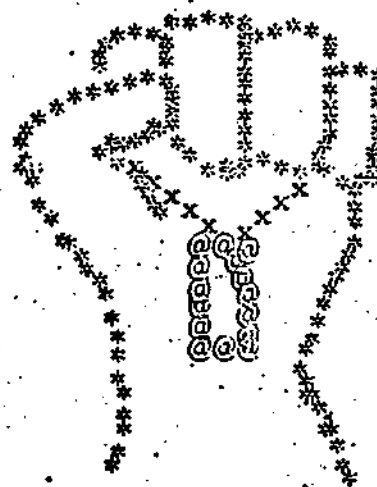
difficult process that can occur through a great deal of struggle. But it is not an impossible goal.

X. Tying the GI and Veterans Movement Together - We in VVAW/WSO also see the great importance of building the GI movement in particularly close relationship with the growing anti-imperialist veterans movement. The struggles of veterans are an important struggle to GIs on a number of levels. Naturally, the vets movement is important to GIs since they will someday be veterans themselves and will be facing new forms of oppression that are only an extension of the same oppressive system they faced in the military. (Ideas on building unity between the vets and GI movement are contained in the Program Proposal following this.) Also, we cannot overlook the need for a movement that GIs can move directly into as they ETS from the service. The vets movement is clearly a logical place for them to go. And, finally, it is logical for veterans to actively work in the GI movement. Given their personal experience with the military and the understanding of the system that they gained by being part of it, vets can and should be recruited into the GI movement as a potentially solid base of civilian support for it.

In conclusion, we think that GI work for the coming period should concentrate on initiating action and providing an anti-imperialist consciousness to our daily work. As the GI movement continues to grow, it should also be one of our primary tasks to link up the struggles of GIs with other struggles throughout the country and the world. We see this conference as just the beginning of the effort to build a fighting, anti-imperialist movement in the US military. We have called the conference in the interest of furthering that effort and developing the necessary unity to carry it forward. We hope that our proposals and thoughts on the GI movement will contribute to the success of this conference and that the level of struggle can be raised as a result. We don't pretend to have the final word on GI organizing. On the contrary, we know that we have a lot to learn. The most workable strategy for the GI movement can only come out of the process of a lot of practice and a lot of struggle. It is with that orientation that our collective work and struggle here will hopefully be approached.

BUILD THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST GI MOVEMENT

UNITE TO FIGHT ALL OPPRESSION!



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VVAW/WSO PROGRAM PROPOSAL FOR GI WORK

We in VVAW/WSO see the need for reaching greater unity within the GI movement as one of the major prerequisites for its continued growth and development. We also feel that one of the best ways we can begin the process of achieving such unity --- and thereby building the anti-imperialist GI movement --- is by building upon our strengths, the common ground we already share, and struggling to achieve as much programmatic unity as we can in the process. While we will undoubtedly not be able to agree on all, or even most, aspects of our work and the strategy for the GI movement (although that is certainly the goal we should all be striving towards), the greater the unified effort we can achieve towards common goals, the greater our success will be. This is obviously not to deny the need, the absolute necessity, for struggle around our political differences. That is the best way of clarifying our various positions and of actually arriving at the best course of action. The point is, however, that in the process of this struggle our goal is always towards achieving greater unity as a result. Unity, struggle, greater unity!

To this end, VVAW/WSO is proposing that the GI conference adopt a unified program proposal for GI work around a minimum goal - Armed Forces Day, 1975. Historically, Armed Forces Day, along with work on ending the war in Indochina has been one of the high points of the GI movement - one of the very few times of the year when widespread efforts were made to mobilize GIs towards certain very basic or general goals. While we realize that this proposal is only for achieving a very minimum level of unity for very specific and limited goals, we nonetheless feel that it can be an important first step in the process of really uniting the GI movement and moving it forward.

There are three parts to this proposal, which we think should be discussed separately. (I) The first part is the slogan we are putting forward as the general political guideline and goal of our work. That slogan is:

BUILD THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST GI MOVEMENT - UNITE TO FIGHT ALL OPPRESSION

(II) The second part consists of the general demands that we feel should be the focus of our day-to-day work with GIs in building for Armed Forces Day. Obviously we are willing to struggle around the specifics of each demand being put forward, but generally speaking the demands selected were done so on the basis of finding the greatest political points of unity in the GI movement as a whole, rather than on attempting to select the specific demands that might be more applicable at one specific military base or ship. The demands fall into two basic categories: demands that are specifically oriented to the day-to-day needs and oppression of GIs, and demands that link the GI movement up with the overall anti-imperialist struggle. They are:

- END ALL RACIAL OPPRESSION!
- END THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN THE MILITARY!
- END NON-JUDICIAL PUNISHMENT!
- END THE USE OF GIs AS STRIKEBREAKERS AND RIOT COPS!
- A SINGLE-TYPE DISCHARGE FOR ALL GIs AND VETS!
- UNIVERSAL AND UNCONDITIONAL AMNESTY FOR ALL WAR RESISTERS!
- IMPLEMENT THE PEACE AGREEMENTS - END ALL AID TO THIEU & LON NO!

(III) The last part of the proposal is that based on the general slogan and specific demands listed above that local and regional actions/demonstrations should take place at or near US military installations all over the world on Armed Forces Day, May 16, '75.

Explanation of Proposal

Based on the experience of our own organization, particularly during the last 9 months, we feel that this type of approach lends itself well to mass organizing and towards building the people's movement. The essence of it lies in achieving as great a unity as is possible around a common program and then moving forward as a united body to implement it. The program is characterized in goals and orientation with an overall political theme or slogan and is built around specific demands to base day-to-day work on demands that speak to people's specific needs and the specific way they are oppressed under imperialism, and demands that link up their struggle with the overall anti-imperialist movement. Day-to-day work around the demands is done with the goal of building for a common massing of strength at a major high point of activity or, in this case, a coordinated series of actions/demonstrations. The massing of strength being built for then in turn serves to broaden and deepen the future mass work done on a day-to-day basis around the demands. Just as the day-to-day work cannot be seen in isolation from the coordinated mass actions, the mass actions and demonstrations cannot be viewed in isolation from the day-to-day work being done; they should only be seen as high points in an ongoing campaign around the demands.

In building for the national demonstration VVAW/WSO held in Washington this past July, our chapters focused on five demands, including amnesty, the war, bad discharges, veterans benefits and Nixon. We felt that this was very effective in local organizing and was a major reason for the successful 4 days of actions in Washington. The point, again, is that the success was directly attributable to the fact that the demonstrations were only seen as a high point in our ongoing campaign around the demands. Similarly, day-to-day mass work was not seen as being separate from the building work done for the DC demonstrations, but rather an integral part of that work.

We felt that starting off with one target date for a GI program was the best approach and that Armed Forces Day was the one day that everyone could agree on. As we sum up the experience of this period next summer, we may all decide on continuing with this approach and adding some other dates for local or national actions, or adding or changing the demands. As to what actually happens on Armed Forces Day, this will be up to each project, base or ship. But whatever form these actions take, it will be a day which GIs can look forward to when they can engage in a united form of resistance knowing that other American GIs will be doing likewise all over the world. We think this is at the heart of what we mean when we talk about unity - not merely a sense of theoretical, political unity, but actual, concrete unity that comes out of our day-to-day practice. The proposal, we feel, is a starting point. It is a minimum program which we feel can lay the groundwork for refining and broadening our work in the future and building unity in the GI movement.

The demands which we have put forward are chosen for a number of reasons. The first is that they can all be tied directly into the nature of US imperialism by getting at why there is racial oppression, why women are oppressed, why there is arbitrary, non-judicial punishment, why GIs are used to break domestic struggles, why the military feels it necessary to brand someone for life with a bad discharge, why the government refuses to grant amnesty to war resisters, and why the US continues to maintain its

presence (including milit. Vietnam.

The first four demands, we feel, are self-explanatory and do not need elaboration for purposes of this proposal. The fifth demand, a single-type discharge, ties the GI movement into the vets movement. It offers the chance to illustrate the fact that the struggles of GIs are part of a much larger struggle and that once they are out of the military they will face other forms of oppression, i. e., being a veteran. If the demand is explained well, it can help GIs to understand that it's not just the military they are up against, but a whole system - a system that will follow them wherever they go. And finally, this demand can be used to explain why GIs are not given the option to quit their job. The discharge system is, in fact, designed to do just that - keep GIs from quitting their job by threatening to give them a lifelong mark.

The amnesty demand, while not directly effecting most GIs (except deserters), does raise one of the most important issues of all by pointing out that resistance to the military, resistance to wars like Vietnam is correct - that resistance to oppression is our responsibility. We think that the strong history of resistance in the military in the last ten years should not be lost to the signing of the Paris Agreement or the signing of Ford's bogus amnesty. Rather, we think it should be brought forward in our daily work and encouraged. The 500,000 GIs who resisted the military and received bad discharge and the tens of thousands of GIs who have deserted represent a tradition of resistance which should be built on, and cannot and should not be forgotten. As anti-imperialists, we should be encouraging resistance in the military and constantly demanding amnesty for those who do resist and suffer the consequences of resistance.

The final demand, which is on the continuing war, is a demand that not only should be continually raised by all Americans, but it points to the most hideous and well-known example of US imperialism and military intervention in recent history. While there are obviously many, many other such examples of imperialism and people's struggles against it, it is our opinion that a demand on ending the war in Indochina could obtain the widest possible unity within the GI movement given the great unity already existing around this demand. It is a demand that is increasingly of major importance for our work given the concrete situation now in Indochina and one that offers a concrete example of what US imperialism really means. There is also the very real possibility that the US military will be back in Indochina in full force in the near future.

We would also expect that local issues would be raised and added to these general demands during the day-to-day work and again on Armed Forces Day.

Finally, the slogan we are proposing for this program - BUILD THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST GI MOVEMENT - UNITE TO FIGHT ALL OPPRESSION! - we feel sums up the essence of what our primary tasks are in the GI movement. We feel that the GI movement can, and must, be built on overtly anti-imperialist lines, as indeed it has been in essence. Anything less than such a political perspective would be objectively holding the movement back and tailing behind the level of political consciousness existing among GIs. Our role as GI organizers is to play a leadership role, showing GIs the best political direction they can take, not passively following behind whatever spontaneous action they may already be involved with. Secondly, the concept of uniting to fight all forms of oppression, both those facing GIs and those facing all people around the world, speaks to the concept of linking up the GI movement with the people's movement as a whole. It squarely points up the fact that the GI movement is part of the overall anti-imperialist movement and cannot be viewed in isolation from it.