

A Critique of the document, Towards a Political Solution by Sam F., Peter D.,  
and Nancy H.

### INTRODUCTION

In the process of a faction fight various comrades make a real effort to understand the roots of the crisis that precipitated the fight. This is basically healthy. However, in this process, some comrades use this opportunity to re-raise old ideas and conceptions that have been long passed by and should remain where they are - dead and buried. In the world of the faction fight in the IS, where it is especially "in" to attack the leadership, this is all the more true. It was, after all, this leadership that had defeated these positions previously. The comrades, Sam F., Peter D., and Nancy H., have most assuredly accomplished just this with their document "Towards a Political Solution" (TPS).

To understand just how wrong they are, and what it would mean to adopt their program requires a brief statement of what this crisis is really all about.

The current faction fight and crisis in the IS must be seen in the context of the monumental transition from a middle class student group to a workers' revolutionary organization that the IS correctly embarked upon in 1969. Indeed, none of us realized the difficulty and nature of the task we set for ourselves. And there have been prices to pay. The head-long rush into sterile sectarianism resulting in the 1973 split with the RSL was a middle class revolt against the realities of trying to center the IS in the mid-west in industry. Likewise, the headlong rush away from industrial work proposed by the "Left" Faction (LF) is a middle class revolt against revolutionaries leading and participating in the struggles of industrial workers. Unless we understand that this, and not the many criticisms, irresponsible charges and leadership methodology is ~~xxx~~ at the root of our present situation, we will not come up with the right answers.

It is in this context, that the positions of the TPS comrades must be seen. For, unlike the LF, they do not reject mass work, industrialization, priorities, but by agreeing with many of the irresponsible charges and slanders raised by the LF, they too demonstrate that they do not understand the nature of the transition that is yet to be completed. The real questions in dispute are not simply industrialization, priorities and mass work, but the need to continue on the road to building a workers' combat organization.

The TPS comrades miss the point from the very beginning. They lay the origins of the crisis on two main and for them, interrelated questions: democratic centralism and de-politization. The remainder of this critique will take up these questions and demonstrate why their criticism of our current methodology and practice is wrong, and why the proposals they made will not carry us forward, but rather carry us back to the not-so-good ole days.

### DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM OR BUREAUCRATIC CENTRALISM

The TPS document charts "true democratic centralist development has been distorted by a number of factors. First and foremost among these is the depoliticization discussed in pt. 2 above." (emphasis in original)

Basically, they imply that if things are not changed along the lines they suggest, the IS will not be democratic centralist, but bureaucratic centralist with a membership accepting discipline out of "passive deference"; identification with a clique" or having "it imposed in increasingly non-political means." The irresponsible charges of substitutionism, kicking ass, clique functioning, suppression of discussion flow from their misunderstanding. To clear this up, I will define democratic centralism.

Democratic centralism can be summed up in the following statement. Discussion in the membership geared toward action; the execution of that action by everyone, followed by discussion in assessing that action. The essence is that the organization exists for one reason and one only: To carry out activity. The discussion is meaningful and taken seriously, precisely because it will mean something in the world. And, I repeat, carrying out that action, not the discussion, is after all why we exist. We are committed to the task of building a workers' movement and a revolutionary workers' party to overthrow capitalism.

But, what does the TPS document suggest we should be discussing to prepare the organization for activity? South Africa, where we are developing a major campaign? The up-coming CWA contract campaign? NO. They propose that we should have yet one more abstract discussion of the Black Party, or whether or not we call for independent black and women's caucuses. Moreover, we are told, all members must understand and be able to politically assess "all aspects of work done by all the various parts of the organization," (emphasis added) Now, is this really possible? Well, maybe, if all members do nothing else. Should an organization of 300 members discuss and politically assess the work of 3 members in another part of the country? What about when we have 1,000 or 10,000 members - does this statement still apply? How do comrades carry on their work - that is to say, their activity on which these discussions are supposedly based - and do all the writing, reading, and discussing to carry this out? No, comrades, you're just dead wrong. This is not the way. What you are suggesting is a discussion group, even though you deny this, and say you don't want it.

Sam, Peter and Nancy state that the problems of today actually re-date the Turn to Agitation. (I wonder if the next document will say that our problems pre-date the 1969 Founding Convention of the IS!). and that in reaction to our past and in particular to the 1973 faction fight, we haven't taken political discussion seriously.

Let's go back and look at the recent history briefly. The 1973 Convention centered around two discussions: our general analysis of the economy and domestic politics and our general task and perspectives; and our labor perspectives. During the year following, and including the 1974 Convention, the EC led the organization through a series of theoretical discussions in order to lay the basis for fundamental theoretical agreement on our analysis of capitalism (the Permanent Arms Economy and the unfolding crisis), stalinism (bureaucratic collectivism), and labor (class struggle unionism.)

At that time such an emphasis was necessary. We had just gone through a faction fight and a split where literally everything had been thrown up for grabs. We all understood that key to building a truly democratic centralist organization was agreement on our fundamental analysis and perspectives. It is common agreement and understanding of the fundamentals of our politics and perspectives, and not necessarily on every strategy, tactic and minor question that makes it possible for us to be flexible in our day to day work and in carrying out our perspectives in the world.

While it was necessary to take a year to go through these discussions, the comrades should understand that we actually led very little activity. The major exception was CLUW. No, comrades - the changes following the 1974 Convention were not due to our fear of returning to the pre-1973 IS, but rather, to move us forward to where the leadership would be chosen and judged on the basis of their ability to lead the IS forward in activity, not in political debates.

The responsibility of leadership is to organize those political discussions that politically educate and motivate the organization to carry out activity in the world. For this purpose, we have annual conventions and a 6 week period of discussion set forth where the leadership is responsible for putting forward it's perspectives based upon our fundamental agreement and the lessons learned by the entire organization over the past year that will take us forward for another year. National Committee meetings play a similar role between conventions. To repeat: The job of the leadership is not to organize discussions on every bit of work, or on every question that arises. Rather it is to organize those discussions necessary to guide our activity and lead that activity.

And while we're on this point, let's take up two charges of the leadership suppressing discussion. First, there's Portugal. There was a full NC debate and discussion on the PRP and Portugal. The EC voted not to have a full national discussion on Portugal. The comrades charging suppression must substantiate them. Did they request any NC member to overrule the EC on this matter and open such a discussion?

Or, on Sadlowski. In fact there have been pages and pages of writing and hours and hours of discussion on the Sadlowski campaign. What the steel fraction and EC did request was a moratorium on discussion of the campaign while it was in progress; that is until the middle of February. Now, really, is that suppressing discussion?

The norms of democratic centralism, as opposed to the norms of a discussion group are clear. Since the purpose of discussion is to decide upon activity, discussion and debate cannot continue during the period the campaign is actually being carried out. The reasons should be obvious. Once an organization, or in this case a section of the organization - the steel fraction - decided democratically on the campaign, it is the responsibility of all comrades to help them build and carry out that campaign - not to debate and discuss every part of it. This is not democracy. Why have an organization, if having decided upon a course of action, you cannot count on your comrades to back you up?

Lenin, who understood most clearly and to whom we owe the conception of democratic centralism had this to say about how criticism and activity relate:

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The Congress of the [RSLDP] decided that the Party should take part in the Duma elections. Taking part in elections is a very definite action. During the elections (as in Baku today, for example) no member of the Party anywhere has any right whatever to call upon the people to abstain from voting; nor can "criticism" of the decision to take part in the elections be tolerated during this period, for it would in fact jeopardize success in the election campaign.....the principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organizations implies universal and full freedom to criticize so long as this does not disturb the unity of a definite action; it rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult the unity of an action decided on by the Party. (all emphasis in original.)

The context in which this was written makes it even clearer. Lenin wrote this short piece in May 1906, during the brief period that the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were united in the Russian Social Democratic Party. At the time, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were in the minority on the Central Committee and in the organization.

To repeat the question: Do our comrades in steel have the right to expect the entire organization to back them up in carrying out the campaign? Or do they rather have to carry it out in isolation, while the rest of the organization busies itself in an orgy of discussion about every move they make? If our goal is action, we should

be backing them up and withholding "criticisms" as Lenin calls them, until the campaign is over and can be assessed. Of ~~our~~ course, if our business is discussion and debating political alternatives, then.....

I've taken a lot of time on this seemingly small point, because it shows clearly that the authors of the TPS document do not really understand democratic centralism.

#### TOWARDS REAL DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM

The period 1975 to ~~any~~ date has been a period in which we've attempted to move forward to a new way of functioning - to an organization geared to action and combat in the world and away from internal discussion for the sake of discussion. And, comrades, the decision to do this was made democratically after a long debate at the 1975 Convention.

The reality is that we haven't moved far enough on the road to becoming a democratic centralist organization. If the organization really understood what we were about, then it wouldn't have tolerated a group organizing underground and then declaring itself a faction six months prior to the annual convention. Think about it comrades. ~~What~~ What immediate catastrophe preceded that could justify ~~such~~ such a course? Had the leadership just completed some action which would have disastrous effects if not remedied immediately? No, in fact, a close re-reading of the ~~October~~ October NC documents in particular those on Mass Work, Party Building, the Periphery campaign and Workers' Power will show that the entire leadership was moving toward correctives to past problems and mistakes. NO. If the organization had politically understood where it was going the appearance of the LF would have been met with ridicule and disgust. IF there is something to be learned from all of this, it is that we haven't trained the organization in what real democratic centralism is, and not that we've degenerated into bureaucratic centralism.

#### LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITY

The TPS document charges that threats of expulsion, closed NC meetings, and the disciplined EC are also to blame for the present crisis. The charges of expulsion threats has been dealt with elsewhere - suffice it to say that there have been no expulsions or threats of such by the EC. Well, what about closed NC meetings, or closed meetings of any leadership body for that matter? The purpose of closing meetings to those involved is not to hide the discussion from the membership as the document implies, but to insure the most open and honest discussion possible. Practically all who attended the last NC would agree that it was the best NC in years, and most would attribute that in part to the fact that it was closed.

But, suppose there were open NC meetings. Who gets to come? Those who live where it is being held, have the spare time, and/or those who can afford to come. What sort of democracy is that? Any comrade who had the time to sit around listening to a meeting all weekend isn't taking enough responsibility for ~~the~~ the work of the organization. This is a conception of democracy for those who have little or nothing to do - not for an organization of dedicated revolutionaries many of whom work 40-60 hours a week in a plant and have what's left for political activity and a little personal life.

This conception is closely related to another. That of EC discipline. Pages have been written on this topic. Only one point will be made here. Leadership must be judged on its ability to lead collectively the organization in action, not on the individual leaders' personal opinion on this or that political question.

### BENDING THE STICK

In the attack on the leadership in the TPS document, one of the points that comes up over and over again is the methodology of bending the stick. Mind you, it is never discussed out right - but references such as "the stick bent" and "broken sticks" appear throughout the document.

Bending the stick is not some nightmare dreamed up by the EC. It is rather a methodology used over and over again by Lenin. It was part of Lenin's genius as a revolutionary leader that he understood that the world does not progress evenly and always in the same way. Bending the stick is closely tied to the need to find the key link in the particular stage of the struggle, which if grasped, would lead the party forward. Once this key link is understood it then has to be stressed again and again - yes - to the exclusion of other areas of work at times. It could be leading a particular struggle in one union, like TDC; or it could be the paper, or it could be political training and education. Once the task is accomplished, the stick can swing back to normal, and on and on.

Do comrades believe that everything progresses the same and there is never any need to emphasize one aspect of the work? Does the world really work that way? At any point in time there are an infinite number of questions to deal with. Are they all equal? Don't take my word for it though. Here's Lenin: "Every question 'runs in a vicious circle' because political life as a whole is an endless chain consisting of an infinite number of links. The whole art of politics lies in finding and taking as firm a grip as we can of the key link that is least likely to be struck from our hands, the one that is most important at the given moment, the one that most guarantees its possessor the possession of the whole chain."

Or, Tony Cliff in Lenin, Vol I: "If all aspects of the workers' movement had been equally developed, if balanced growth had been the rule, then 'stick bending' would have a deleterious effect on the movement. But, in real life the law of uneven development dominates. One aspect of the movement is decisive at any particular time. The key obstacle to advance may be a lack of party cadres, or, on the contrary, the conservatism of the party cadres may cause them to lag behind the advanced section of the class. Perfect synchronisation of all elements would obviate the need for 'bending sticks', but it would also render a revolutionary party or a revolutionary leadership superfluous."

What the TPS comrades do is to see the world and our relationship to it in static terms. But events are constantly changing, and if we are out to change the world, as Marx so aptly put it, then we must be prepared to take these changes into account and to focus all our energy and resources where they will have the most effect. That, comrades, is what bending the stick is all about.

### "SUBSTITUTIONISM"

The EC is also charged with substituting itself for the IBT and CWA fractions. In the first place, amalgamating these together indicates a very serious lack of understanding of what actually took place (and I might add, one NOT attributable to not having the information.) In the case of the IBT fraction, what was carried out throughout the TTC/USWAs campaign was close collaboration between the IBT fraction leadership and the EC. In this period, it is clear that one of the most important goals to be accomplished is building a unified leadership which includes the full time leadership and the industrial leaders. The work and collaboration between the fraction leadership and the EC was a key part in building this. Only by achieving such a united leadership will we be able to avoid the pitfalls of sectarianism and economism and of real substitutionism.

The case of the CWA fraction is quite different. Here the work suffered a serious defeat particularly in Louisville. The EC has stepped in to help rebuild the fraction. Should they or shouldn't they have done this? It's easy to make charges, but much more difficult to take responsibility for the organization. I believe the EC was correct to commit resources from the center to help rebuild the fraction. The small, but real potential that exists in that union today might well have been lost without the EC playing the role it has played. Where do you stand? Was it correct or not?

#### A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

We are all committed to building and maintaining a national organization - and - if centralism means anything, it means that all relevant sections of the organization will carry out the democratically decided upon perspectives. But, one of the complaints mentioned over and over again is that of intervening in branches, or of branch organizers fighting with members, sometimes more ~~press~~ politically experienced - but wrong none-the-less - to get them to carry out the line. And, sometimes this means "kicking ass." Should the central leadership intervene in branches to insure they carry out the national organization's perspectives? Should branches carry out the policies decided on at the convention? Is "kicking ass" justified when political motivation doesn't work? What's your answer? Are we to maintain a national organization, or return to the old federalism where each branch did what it wanted?

Why is it that newer members sometimes have to take on the old timers - could it be that they are right and the old-timers wrong? If many of the older more experienced comrades had been willing to lead the turn rather than longing for the good ole days, then newer members wouldn't have to take on those who are more formally politically experienced.

Of course, when newer members, and even older politically experienced comrades support, defend and fight for the politics of the EC they are tossed off as loyalists or hacks. Where, except in an intellectual discussion group, is it considered uncool to agree with the politics and perspectives of the leadership? Where, except in a discussion group, does the ability to criticize, make debater's points, make you a worth while political person, and those who support or defend the politics of the leadership - loyalists or hacks. Calling everyone who agrees with the basic policies and perspectives of the leadership of a revolutionary organization a hack or loyalist is patronizing and only shows the real backwardness of those who do so.

#### PROPOSALS FOR ACTION OR PROPOSALS FOR DISCUSSION

Following also from a lack of what democratic centralism means, we are presented with a shopping list of proposals for work so that we will not have any more "second class citizens." These include work around comrades in non-priority unions/industries, support work for strikers of women, involvement in groups protesting social cutbacks, national student(college) work, with a national coordinator, Latin work, organizing forums, films, lit tables at campuses, participating in "non-sectarian radical or Marxist schools", occasional propaganda leaflets addressed to struggles not necessarily in our priorities, work with gay,

Now, many of these have been done on a limited scale where resources exist. And this will not only continue, but where possible, be expanded. And, certainly, some activities can be justified on the basis of recruitment. No one will quarrel with this. But does this mean that the responsible thing is to throw out every "good idea" and suggestion for the organization to do? How serious is that? It's fine

and well to pass resolutions to do all of the above, but can and will they all be carried out? How can comrades justify doing all of the above, and maintaining our national priorities - and our ~~black~~ black work, which they fail to ~~mention~~ mention except in the context of discussions on the black party? And isn't one of the complaints that comrades are "burnt out"?

The reality is that any serious leadership that is responsible to the membership understands that we cannot do everything. That is the purpose of having priorities. The authors' purpose seems to be to discuss doing all of these things, since they can't really be serious that we can do all of them.

There are perspectives that need to be developed - in particular for women's and black work. They will not be taken up here as separate documents are in the process of being produced. What is disturbing about the TPS comrades is their methodology of raising everything about everything.

The question of so-called second class citizenship will not be solved by finding peripheral areas of work. It is the responsibility of the leadership bodies on all levels to find roles for all members in building the IS as an industrial organization of revolutionaries. Going back to college campuses and doing strike support work will not change anything in a positive direction. By building an industrial organization we include our perspectives for black and women's liberation. As much as possible these must be integrated and tied into our industrial work, and not off in some corner.

On student work: Close to one page, if it is all added up, is on the importance of recruiting students. But no where is there any mention of the Red Tide, which is made up of working class black and which high school students. These comrades have nothing to say about this student work. Instead they focus on the middle class college campuses. In those areas where we have the resources, we want to have a presence at black and working class community colleges. Some initiatives in Detroit have and are being taken in these areas through Gary Tyler, Women Against Racism, and the Southern Africa campaign. Other branches are investigating possibilities. But this ~~isn't~~ isn't what the comrades have in mind. For this you don't need a national coordinator for student work for students. In Bloomington and Amherst we have recruited students - but not by doing "student work." The best of these students were recruited by political discussion and activity related to our industrial work (strike support, boycotts, etc.)

#### THE GOOD OLE DAYS

One more point. Because the TPS document comrades seem to imply that everything was better earlier, let's take a brief look at the good ole days. It's very true that we spent hours and hours debating the crucial questions of struggle groups vs. rank and file caucuses, or whether we were for or against a black party, or independent political action, or of should we be calling for or just supporting blacks' and women's caucuses, were we for a labor party or a workers' party, was dues check-off good or back, were we for or against busing, and hundreds, probably thousands of others. Many waited to get the latest NAC (EC) minutes to see who had voted with whom on what, etc., etc., etc.

Moreover, we all thought we were learning something. But, were we? The truth is comrades that much of our valuable time and energy was wasted on these abstract questions. And, sure enough, once we got involved in industrial work, once we began to get involved in busing and black work, and not simply discussing these questions abstracted from what was going on, most of the answers fell into place.

In truth, comrades, we have learned more over the past 2-3 years of **participating in and trying to lead workers' and black struggles**, than we did in all those other years of debate. There can be no revolutionary theory without **revolutionary practice**. Were the good ole days really so good?

#### WHAT IS 'DE-POLITICIZATION'?

De-politicization now means everything to some and thus nothing. Let's start by defining our terms. When the EC and NC discussed the problem of de-politicization, they were referring to the period of 6 months or so when we virtually ignored all other work for the TDC campaign. Other areas of work received little attention. Comrades felt they didn't know what was going on, and weren't getting any help. Much of what comrades felt was legitimate. We had for a time, practically liquidated the organization into the TDC campaign. Now is not the time to debate whether or not, or how or how not to have done this. But it is the time to explain that what the TPS comrades mean by de-politicization and what the leadership meant are not the same thing. These comrades assert that this process has been going on before we began the turn to agitation. So, what do they mean by this term?

This term is closely tied for these comrades to what is called "a truly internalized political consciousness." Going over and over their document to understand what is meant by an internalized political consciousness, I came up with the following: Every member, presumably within say 6 months of joining, should know and be able to politically assess all the work of the organization, understand and be able to discuss the question of a black party, or the role of Cuban troops in Angola, the PRP in Portugal, as well as the politics of the Carter administration, what's happening in the economy nationally and internationally, the nature of the South Africa regime, as well as understanding his or her own union/industry, democratic centralism, bureaucratic collectivism, the Permanent Arms Economy, Party and Class, and, of course, the perspectives for the organization for the coming period. Comrades, maybe I misread you, because obviously when you see it all spelled out you know it'd be ridiculous. But this is what is suggested in various sections of your document.

We do aim, and we have not always done well with it, to politically train and explain the basics of our politics and perspectives to all comrades upon joining. We do this in various ways: The Basic Education Program, classes, class series, cadre schools, summer school, one on ones, films, etc. But since you're aware of these you much mean something more. What you're proposing in reality then is either totally idealist and/or a discussion group. It is certainly not a revolutionary workers' group geared for activity.

The question is, how do we develop our politics? Through debating abstractions, reading, what? We develop our politics in many ways. Through reading, discussion, formal and informal, classes, films, etc., but most importantly, and key to developing real revolutionaries is the process of learning politics through applying them in building a workers' movement and a workers' revolutionary organization. That is, WE LEARN THEM THROUGH STRUGGLE - through developing perspectives, debating and discussing them, carrying them out and assessing afterwards. It's those political questions which must be discussed and understood. But, again, not everyone can learn about every question that arises from our Teamster work or our South Africa work. The general lessons and political experience applicable for the entire organization and which ~~we~~ deepen our understanding of where we have to go must be brought out. And they are. At Conventions, NC's, etc.



Because, you see, comrades, in the real world and not in some idealized conception of a democratic centralist organization, the membership will always be uneven. The length of time in the organization, level of commitment, inclination and interest in theory all mean that we will never have a fully conscious membership or a truly "internally politically conscious membership." ~~That~~ That is why we must have a leadership that leads. What we can and must have is an ever expanding cadre and leadership (and we still have a lot to learn to get this right) that can train newer members and retrain older ones, in the fundamentals of revolutionary socialism and our perspectives and strategies for building a workers' combat organization.

And yet, what do the authors propose for the Convention discussion? To rediscuss class struggle unionism, mass work, and party building. Where do we discuss our perspectives and plans for next year? Where do we take up the much needed discussion of black and women's perspectives?

Our trade union work does not need yet another abstract discussion. What we need are discussions based on the concrete lessons we've learned so that as an organization we can generalize from the experience of all the comrades and advance our work.

Overall then, once we get beneath the irresponsible and unsubstantiated charges - the myths that go for truth in the IS today - and a shopping list of suggestions, some of which are positive if they weren't all lumped together, what we are left with is a conception of democratic centralism and a revolutionary organization that has very little in common with what a truly democratic centralist workers' revolutionary organization will be like.

Rather than an organization based on activity, focusing it's meager resources to carry out that activity in building the IS in industry, we have an organization based on discussion. It follows then that leadership bodies lead by intense discussion by "debating political alternatives"; not leadership bodies that collectively make and responsibly carry out decisions that build the IS. This is in reality an organization with no leadership. We've had it before, and we don't need it again! If we had a homogenous membership, we wouldn't need leadership bodies, but then we wouldn't need a revolutionary party if working class consciousness was homogenous. Even you comrades can see how unrealistic this is. Sad to say, we need the revolutionary party to make the revolution and that party or the organization intending to build the party needs real leadership that leads, not leadership that debates political alternatives for the benefit of the membership.

I believe the comrades, Sam, Peter, Nancy, who wrote the TPS document are sincere when they said they didn't want to return to the much dreaded talk shop. It follows then, that they do not understand clearly what we're about and where we have to go and how we can get there. We've made a lot of progress over the past few years along the road we have to travel. But we have a long long way to go. This faction fight, despite the fact that it was not necessary, and has already cost us in valuable time and resources, can be progressive if we all come out of it with a clearer understanding of the gigantic task we've undertaken and the methodology and politics and perspectives we need to accomplish this task. But, if we end up following the conceptions and methodology in the TPS document, we will not have taken one step backward to take two forward; we'll have fallen right back into the NOT so good ole days.