

Intervention & Union Work

An SLP Handbook

Introduction

The contents of this handbook are based on positions adopted at NEC Sessions and National Conventions since 1977. It has been prepared to make the sense of those positions more readily available for the guidance of members who engage in intervention and union activities on behalf of the SLP.

Since the guidelines that follow embody the principles—as well as the strategy and tactics—of the SLP in the fields of intervention and union work, they are binding on all Party members who engage in such activities. It is, therefore, the obligation of members to familiarize themselves with these guidelines before becoming involved in either area, and to be guided by them in all instances where they are applicable.

Also, before becoming involved members should consult with and seek the approval of their sections, if they belong to one; or of the NEC, if members-at-large. Thereafter, regular reports should be made by the involved members to their sections—or to the NEC where they are not attached to a section. Sections, of course, should keep the NEC informed of the intervention and union activities of their members.

Every important decision connected with intervention and union work should be made in consultation with the section or the NEC. Disagreements over getting involved, and what is done after getting involved, should be resolved through established Party channels, up to and including the NEC.

Infractions of the guidelines set forth here—even unwitting ones—cannot be taken lightly. Such deviations are serious

organizational matters because they weaken the Party's integrity and unity. They must be dealt with accordingly.

These guidelines are not a finished product. Situations will arise for which they do not provide. In such cases members should not attempt to resolve individually the problems they encounter. They should confer with their section; and the section, in turn, should confer with the NEC. Only in this way can we hope to develop and maintain a coherent and consistent policy on intervention and union work, and improve our guidelines for more effective agitation in these spheres of activity.

Finally, it should be noted that intervention and union work, while important, are not our highest priority as an organization. Our highest priority is to build the SLP. Where, when and to what extent we become involved in issue-oriented movements and coalitions, and unions, is an organizational decision. It is a strategy to which greater or lesser emphasis may be given at different times. Members should always be prepared to adapt themselves to section, NEC and National Convention decisions affecting the importance placed on this or other strategies that the Party may stress in pursuing our primary objective of building the SLP.

Intervention

GUIDELINES FOR SLP INTERVENTION IN ISSUE-ORIENTED MOVEMENTS AND COALITIONS

Before setting down some basic guidelines for effective SLP intervention, some basic questions should be resolved.

First: What is meant by participation and/or intervention?

These terms cover the wide spectrum of activities ranging from actually joining in parades, demonstrations and picket lines to leafleting or rendering financial assistance. And they include participation in the planning and the execution of plans for activities by these organizations, joining their ranks and helping in whatever way we can in their activities.

Second: What is our objective in intervening in a particular group?

Our primary objective is to reach the rank and file of these organizations, and sympathizers that they attract, with the Party's program and principles. Our purpose is *not* to "raid" these groups, to try to manipulate them into support for the Party or to capture positions of authority within them. Our purpose in reaching workers through these organizations is ultimately to attract people who may become members or sympathizers of the Party.

The following are guidelines for agitational activities within issue-oriented organizations.

1. IN WHAT KIND OF ORGANIZATION SHOULD WE SEEK TO INTERVENE?

We should approach those organizations which offer the best opportunities to present our program and to carry on agitational

work with maximum effect. Organizations based upon questions or issues that we can best cultivate for an exposition of our analysis and program should be given a priority. Examples: Anti-apartheid groups, peace organizations, etc.

2. WHAT LEVEL OF POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT ARE WE SEEKING THROUGH INTERVENTION?

This depends upon the nature of the group in question and the circumstances prevailing at a given time. But as indicated above it can include the entire spectrum of activities offered by this kind of Party work. The section should collectively discuss and decide this at the local level.

3. TO WHAT EXTENT SHALL WE COOPERATE WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS?

It should be kept in mind that cooperation with other groups is a necessary part of this kind of work, and that such cooperation is appropriate so long as the Party's principles and program are not compromised. Sectarian and hostile attitudes of the past must be put aside.

4. TO WHAT EXTENT SHALL OUR MEMBERS GET INVOLVED IN PLANNING AND CONDUCTING DEMONSTRATIONS AND MASS PROTESTS?

The answer to this question essentially lies with the section's judgment. However, it should be noted here that in order to establish a credible SLP presence in a given group we must be willing to shoulder some of the responsibilities involved wherever possible.

5. SHOULD OUR MEMBERS ACTUALLY JOIN CERTAIN COALITIONS AND MOVEMENTS?

Yes, and in accordance with the principles set forth above. It should be clearly understood by all, however, that in doing so the member is duty bound to identify him/herself as an SLP member to the group that s/he joins; and that member is further obliged to conduct SLP agitation within the group in an open manner.

6. WHAT SHOULD THE SLP'S ATTITUDE BE TOWARD OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES THAT ARE ALSO INTERVENING IN THESE DEMONSTRATIONS AND MOVEMENTS?

Our attitude should be at all times courteous and civil. Cooperation with members of other political parties in order to carry on the immediate work of the group in which we have intervened is appropriate.

7. WHAT DEGREE OF COOPERATION, IF ANY, ARE SLP MEMBERS TO GIVE SUCH PARTIES IN CONNECTION WITH JOINTLY SPONSORED EFFORTS?

Whatever degree of cooperation is necessary in order to effectively carry out the work of the organization. Unnecessary factional quarrels within the group are to be avoided. However, where a question of principle arises our members should with vigor enter into open debate on the floor of the group meeting in order to clearly establish our position.

8. WHAT ROLE IS THE SECTION TO PLAY IN THIS KIND OF PARTY WORK?

Where the intervening member belongs to a section, this kind of work is to be considered a section project. The section must exercise complete control over this kind of activity by deciding where and when to intervene and in what group to do so. The member who does this work must be required to report back to the section on his/her progress regularly.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE SLP TOWARD THE REFORM DEMAND

It is obvious that in establishing a policy which encourages the membership to intervene or participate in various issue-oriented movements and coalitions with a view toward getting our program across to the rank and file of these organizations and the sympathizers that they attract, we must also deal with the fact that

we will encounter any number of political demands advocated by such groups that in our view are blatantly reformistic.

It has traditionally been, and is now, the position of the Party that the reform demand should not ever be part of the program of a revolutionary party and that it is a device designed solely to placate the working class engaged in struggle and to defuse its revolutionary development by alleviating some immediate problem directly caused by the capitalist system. There is nothing in the present situation within the Party or the country that warrants a change in that position.

In the past, however, our people in the field have tended to pass over the issue raised by the reform demand and immediately to enunciate our position on reform as though this were in and of itself sufficient to dispel all the problems raised. This resulted in a total lack of relevance in such a response to reform, and a mechanical repetition of certain key phrases and arguments that made it appear that we were talking in a vacuum. No effective attempt was made to establish a connection between the issue or problem raised by the demand, its source in the nature of the capitalist system and its resolution in a socialist revolution. Consequently, our approach to these situations has been pedantic and irrelevant. In most cases it led us to a position wherefrom we merely expounded upon our view and criticized all participation in protests and demonstrations as pointless exercises in futility. There can be no doubt that this approach contributed heavily toward our isolation for many decades.

A new approach must therefore be worked out upon the following principles:

1. While the SLP does not advocate reform measures in its program, it does not oppose the occasional and temporary alleviations from human misery that are won by the working class. For example, though the SLP certainly does not advocate social security, national health insurance or any one of a number of “social” reforms, it cannot be fairly said that we oppose such measures.

2. Those who organize themselves to protest or demonstrate against a particular evil generated by this system are doing something positive in that they are at least resisting these encroachments by that system.

3. Such struggle has great educational value to the working class because it leads to a bucking of the outer limits of the capitalist system and may even lead to a questioning of those limits.

4. Some of the demands raised in such struggles can never be resolved under capitalism, and thus may lead to the exposure of the limited nature of the particular demand and call into question the very legitimacy of the prevailing order of things.

5. Struggles of this kind have in almost every instance been fought out at least once before in history, and it can be readily pointed out to those engaged that it is capitalism that forces us to fight the same battles over and over again.

6. The SLP can readily support the given struggle while at the same time pointing to its severe limitations (critical support) and while—

a. Establishing the connection between the problem at hand and its source in capitalism,

b. Relating the issue at hand to our revolutionary demand and the program for its attainment,

c. Analyzing the issue raised in terms of the above two elements.

7. We can establish a rapport with those involved in such a movement by analyzing the problem in relevant terms and establishing clearly the fact that we are going in the same direction but they are stopping short of what should be their objective.

8. We must also encourage these people to reject reliance upon the capitalist politicians for a resolution to their problems and emphasize that they must rely only upon themselves as a class organized to fight against the system's encroachments; and

9. We must at all times avoid a pedantic, condescending attitude or posture.

THE NEED FOR A FLEXIBLE POLICY ON INTERVENTION

The Party needs to develop and maintain a flexible position on intervention that will provide the membership with a meaningful guide to this kind of Party work.

We must learn to deal with the fact that in certain instances we will confront restrictions or limitations upon our freedom to agitate within an issue-oriented organization and at the same time find it a tolerable restraint because of some other gain that we see as attainable. We must learn to balance the possible losses with the possible gains and not be confined to any one fixed policy.

In intervening in a given group one of our objectives should be to establish as credible a presence as possible under the circumstances. In line with this principle we should make every effort wherever possible to get in on the planning of events and demonstrations in order to have input into the setting up of ground rules for the activity. And in doing this we must keep in mind the fact that there are going to be elements in every group that are going to be opposed to a socialist influence or even a presence. Such an element might attempt to introduce an exclusionary rule that bars our effective participation. Consequently, another objective of SLP intervention should be to seek adoption by the group of a non-exclusionary rule.

ON RELATING TO OTHER LEFT PARTIES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IN THE COURSE OF INTERVENTION

Though it may be necessary and even desirable to cooperate with other left groups when intervening in issue-oriented movements, there is a sharp distinction between such cooperation and promotion by SLP members of the activities (or publications) of those groups. Accordingly, our members should refrain from participating in or appearing as speakers at rallies, forums,

conventions and other events arranged by them to build their organizations.

Our object in intervening is to build the SLP by reaching the uncommitted majority of workers who may be attracted by issue-oriented movements. It is not to raid other left parties or to develop dialogues with them.

On the other hand, we must avoid a sectarian attitude toward the rest of the left. Wherever we encounter other left groups when intervening in issue-oriented movements, our behavior should always be civil and reasonable.

Union Work

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF TRADE UNION WORK AS PARTY WORK

The existing labor unions are the only strictly working-class organizations in this country and as such constitute the most important area in which socialists can be involved. All Party members who belong to labor unions are therefore encouraged to actively participate in these organizations wherever and whenever possible. Such activity is based upon the clear recognition of both the potential usefulness of unions as organs of class struggle and their severe limitations as such under present conditions and in their present form.

Party members are especially urged to seek out and become actively involved in any genuine rank-and-file movement in opposition to the prevailing union bureaucracy. Workers who are actively resisting the encroachments of such a bureaucracy might be more readily and favorably disposed toward our agitation than those not so engaged. There is a revolutionary potential in such movements.

In order to facilitate this kind of activity certain basic principles should be clearly understood and carefully adhered to by each member. They are as follows:

1. The Party member who engages in activity within a labor union is to do so in total and open adherence to the Party's principles and program.
2. Such activity is to be regarded as a form of Party work upon which the individual member is to report regularly to his/her

section (or to the national organization if s/he is a member-at-large) and over which the Party is to exert control.

3. The member who runs for union office must do so only after having openly declared him/herself as a member of the SLP and an advocate of socialist industrial unionism to the rank and file.

4. No member is to accept appointment to any union office by the procapitalist bureaucracy in control of the union at a given time without prior approval of the NEC.

5. The ultimate end of all agitation within a union must be the advancement of the program of socialist industrial unionism. Where the goal of converting an existing union to an SIU is inaccessible, workers should be encouraged to make democratic demands which will facilitate the formation of socialist industrial unions.

6. The member who does this kind of Party work should actively seek out and join rank-and-file dissident movements that create an opposition to the labor bureaucracy. S/he should support any demand advanced by such a group that would serve to advance the cause of working-class solidarity along class struggle lines and that would tend to raise the classconsciousness of workers in that union.

7. Every SLP member active in a union reform movement must always be conscious that, while most of the workers involved are fighting primarily to make the union more responsive to their bread and butter and other immediate demands, our Party seeks to democratize the union's structure for the added reason that we wish to create the means whereby the union may be converted to revolutionary purposes. No attempt should be made to conceal or even to play down this SLP objective. But it should not hinder our members from giving full, if critical, support to the union reform movement.

8. Where, in a union to which an SLP member belongs, dissident elements are in the process of forming a caucus or other organized group, s/he must strive to persuade them that a truly

effective pro-worker organization needs to be based on socialist principles. If the caucus or other group is instead formed along reform (nonsocialist) lines, the SLP member should join it and continue to advocate socialist principles of organization to its supporters.

9. Where a dissident reform group runs candidates in a union election, an SLP member can at most give such candidates qualified and critical support because, like the group that nominated them, they usually lack a socialist class perspective. Whether or not to give particular reform candidates even critical support is a question that should be referred in each instance to the NEC for decision since the variety of possible situations which may arise has thus far prevented the Party from formulating a more definite policy in this area.

10. Whenever the Party decides that SLP members may give critical support to particular reform candidates in a union election, the members concerned should not neglect to emphasize two specific points in their election propaganda: a) They must stress that the mere replacement of the bureaucrats in power will not be enough; that what the workers' best interests require is not just a change in leadership, but a basic change in the union's structure and goals. b) They must impress on those aligned with the reform group the importance of not disbanding if the group's candidates are elected. The group should not only be urged to maintain its rank-and-file organization but to develop and enlarge it. Wherever a positive response may be obtained to such urging, SLP members of the group will gain a wider field in which to agitate for socialist principles and for expansion of the group's programmatic objectives.

11. SLP agitation within a union should always have as its general basis the following: a) an emphasis upon the class struggle element in unionism; b) an exposition of the class interests involved in a given confrontation with the capitalist class; c) the true revolutionary role of unionism; d) the betrayal of working-class interests by the union bureaucracy; e) the superiority of the SIU

structure for a union; and f) the resolution of the class struggle in socialist revolution.

12. The agitation prescribed above need not and should not be abstract or general in content. Socialist principles can be made immediately relevant for union members by practical applications of them to an analysis of problems confronting the rank and file at a given time. For example, in a situation where the union bureaucracy joins capitalists in the operation of a productivity committee (as was the case several years ago in the USW), De Leonists in the union can use this opportunity to directly expose the class collaborationism of the union leadership, to explain the principles of the class struggle, and to urge rejection of such class collaboration along with its brotherhood-of-capital-and-labor premises.

13. SLP members in the union movement should also encourage the broadening of that movement's scope into areas of general working-class concern that are not strictly union matters, such as efforts to support women and oppressed minorities. It is of vital importance that the working class view itself as a distinct entity concerned with the problems of every segment of the class. The union movement must make the solidarity of all workers in every struggle waged against the capitalist class and their system a matter of its deep concern and an area where it must bring its fullest power to bear. This principle will be the very basis of a revolutionary socialist labor movement that will one day unify the entire working class for a final struggle to destroy capitalism and establish socialism.

14. Where workers who are not unionized initiate a union organizing effort, it is the duty of a Party member to advocate the formation of a classconscious/socialist union. If her/his efforts fail, that member can then extend critical support to the organizing of a trade union. Under no circumstances is a member to act as the agent, paid or unpaid, of such a union.

A PROGRAM OF DEMANDS FOR THE
ADVANCEMENT OF SOCIALISM WITHIN THE LABOR
MOVEMENT

The purpose of these demands is to provide the basis for an open and clear development of the principles of socialist industrial unionism within the context of the prevailing procapitalist union movement. The SLP has as its principal purpose the organization of a revolutionary unionism, a new labor movement, among the workers of the United States as it is embodied in the program of socialist industrial unionism. These demands are designed to advance that goal within the present union movement by increasing the control of the rank and file over the union, by encouraging opposition to the bureaucracy in control of a union and its form of unionism, and ultimately by calling for a reorganization and massive expansion of the labor movement along revolutionary lines.

These demands are not meant to be all-inclusive and applicable in all circumstances. They are designed only to provide a programmatic application of the principles of socialist industrial unionism to the labor movement as it now exists.

1. All union officers should be elected directly by the rank and file and their salaries should be no greater than the wages of the workers that they represent.

2. All union officers should be subject to recall at any time that a majority of their constituents vote for such a recall.

3. All union contracts must be submitted to the rank and file for final approval. Copies of a proposed contract must be made available to the entire union membership before a vote can be taken upon it and within an adequate period of time prior to the date set for that vote to allow for sufficient review and discussion by the membership.

4. No contract shall contain any restriction on the right to strike. Nor shall it contain any provision that impedes the right of workers to strike over local working conditions or safety questions.

5. No union charter, constitution or bylaw shall empower the union to take any disciplinary action against workers who resort to “wildcat” strikes or work stoppages.

6. No union charter, constitution or bylaw shall empower the taking over of a local or a union by the executive authority of a national or international body alone under any circumstances.

7. All workers in the same industry are to be covered by the same contract. Where such workers are covered by different contracts the expiration date on each is to be the same.

8. All revisions and/or amendments of a union’s charter, constitution or bylaw must be submitted to the rank-and-file membership for final approval.

9. All union organizers, business agents and shop stewards are to be members of the same union they represent and shall be directly elected by the rank and file, subject to recall; and where they receive salaries, these should not be greater than the wages of the workers that they represent.

10. All union policy decisions and decisions on matters of general importance to the membership shall be made directly by the workers at a local meeting or through a delegated convention. The delegates to any such convention must be elected directly by the rank and file. Contract demands that are democratically determined by the membership should be made binding upon the delegated contract negotiators.

11. Amendment procedures for union charters, constitutions and bylaws shall be simplified in order to facilitate the widest possible change by the rank and file with minimal difficulty.

12. There shall be no division among workers in a union according to craft, race, ethnic origin, sex or any other artificial delineation.

13. We support programs designed to break down discriminatory barriers within the union that have for years served to further the exploitation and oppression of women and minorities under the capitalist system. At the same time we recognize the

limitations of such programs as vehicles for the advancement of those elements of the working class within the context of this system and the threat of divisiveness inherent in them.

14. Unions should demand and participate in the organization of the 80 percent of this nation's workers not now in any union.

15. Unions should encourage class solidarity by including the unemployed and retired members of the working class into unions.

16. All workers are to be encouraged to show class solidarity and support with their class brothers and sisters in a strike. Methods to include slowdowns, work stoppages and strikes.

17. The union shall not endorse or use funds to support capitalist candidates for political office.

ONE AREA OF UNION ACTIVITY TO BE SHUNNED:
PARTICIPATION IN UNION-SPONSORED EFFORTS
TO FORM A "LABOR PARTY"

The reference here is to the drive to form a "labor party" being touted by union hierarchs like UAW's Fraser and IAM's Winpisinger. Such a party could not possibly reflect anything but the same class collaboration that characterizes its parent procapitalist unions and would inevitably be the antithesis of the bona fide labor party that a revolutionary industrial organization of the working class can alone give rise to.¹

¹ For more information in this subject see *Daniel De Leon on 'Labor Parties'* at www.slp.org.

Appendix

The 1982 National Convention ruled that the following be included with this handbook on intervention and union work:

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Sections should report such [union and intervention] involvements to the national office as follows:

- a. A comprehensive report of the initial plans.
- b. Report all important developments as soon as possible.
- c. A prompt and comprehensive report upon the completion of any project.

This is not intended to just load the files of the national headquarters. This would help coordinate the efforts of the entire SLP organization to serve for the best possible implementation and improvement of succeeding efforts.

- d. That any project which has newsworthy qualities should be reported as a usable news article or with sufficient background information for *The People* staff to prepare a news article, if they so decide. This requires more than statistical accounts or brief outlines. Again, this should be reported promptly before it becomes dated.