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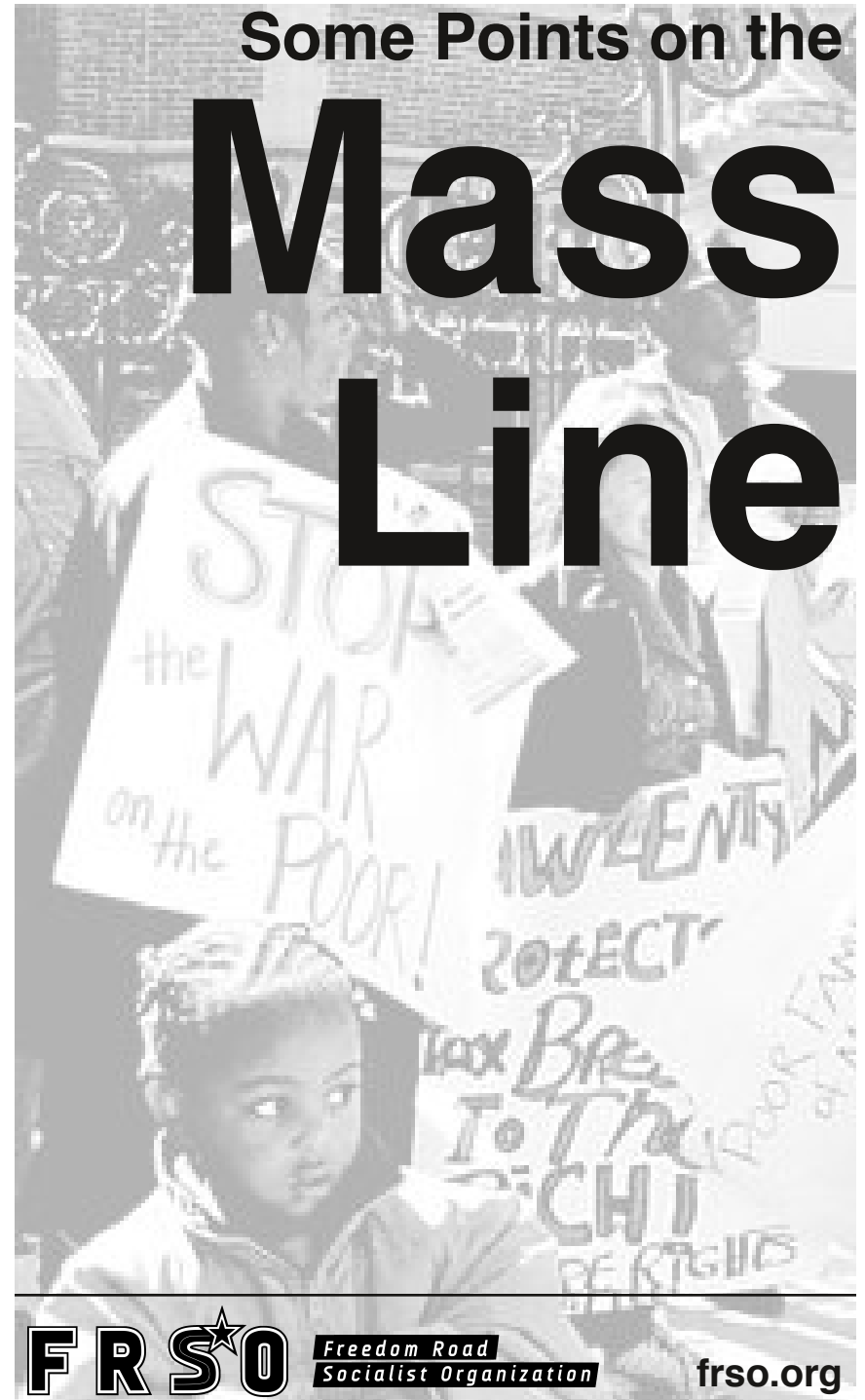


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Some Points on the

# Mass Line



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## Some Additional Reading

For those folks that want to know more about the mass line, we recommend the following readings. Not every one of these readings uses the term 'mass line,' but all of them deal with the whys and how of how communists carry out mass mobilizations.

**REPORT ON AN INVESTIGATION OF THE PEASANT MOVEMENT IN HUNAN**, Selected Works of Mao ZeDong, Vol 1, page 23.

**A TALK TO THE EDITORIAL STAFF OF THE SHANSI-SUIYUAN DAILY**, Selected Works of Mao ZeDong, Vol 4, page 241.

**THE UNITED FRONT IN CULTURAL WORK**, Selected Works of Mao ZeDong, Vol 3, page 185.

**SOME QUESTIONS CONCERNING METHODS OF LEADERSHIP**, Selected Works of Mao ZeDong, Vol 3, page 117.

**METHODS OF WORK OF PARTY COMMITTEES**, Selected Works of Mao ZeDong, Vol 4, page 377.

**THE PARTY'S MASS LINE MUST BE FOLLOWED IN SUPPRESSING COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARIES**, Selected Works of Mao ZeDong, Vol 5, page 50.

**ON THE CO-OPERATIVE TRANSFORMATION OF AGRICULTURE**, Selected Works of Mao ZeDong, Vol 5, page 185.

Sections 1, 2, 3, and 12 are of particular importance.

**THINGS ARE BEGINNING TO CHANGE**, Selected Works of Mao ZeDong, Vol 5, page 440.

**THE HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR IN THE U.S.S.R.**, Edited by M. Gorky, V. Molotov, K. Voroshilov, S. Kirov, A. Zhdanov, J. Stalin, Vol. 1, Chapter 5, The Bolshevik Party Works to Win the Masses, International Publishers.

**ON CONFOUNDING POLITICS WITH PEDAGOGICS**, Lenin Collected Works, Vol. 8, page 453.

**ARMED INSURRECTION AND OUR TACTICS**, J.V. Stalin Works, Vol. 1, page 133

**FANSHEN**, Bill Hinton

## Some Points on the Mass Line

**By Freedom Road Socialist Organization  
February 2008**

*This study was prepared by a leading member of FRSO in the late 1980s. Since then this study has been used extensively inside and outside our organization and it has been reprinted in a number of different political settings. The application of the mass line is basic to how we do our work in trade unions, in the movements of oppressed nationalities, in anti-war and other progressive struggles. It informs our work on building a new communist party.*

### Introduction

**1) The mass line is the basic political/organization method of communists.** Although the term mass line was coined by the Communist Party of China, the basic method of reliance on, and the mobilization of, the masses of people has been utilized by all successful revolutionary parties.

As a topic, discussion of the mass line encompasses aspects of many things, including philosophy (the relationship between theory and practice, between knowing and doing), Marxist-Leninist strategy and tactics (united front work, correct methods of leadership), and organizational theory (party building - the construction of revolutionary organization).

**2) Our starting point is this:** *"The people, and the people alone are the motive force in making world history."* (Mao Zedong) Not only is this historically true, but for us communists it hits on the basic issue of on whom do we rely and how to get stuff done. Perhaps it is self-evident that without people, very little can be accomplished, but this has been the subject of more than a little debate among revolutionaries in the past.

**Q: Have you seen, or can you think of examples of left/progressive forces that have failed to rely on the people? What has been the result?**

## **Need To Understand How Society Develops**

**3) Do people make history any old way? NO.** They make history according to the laws that guide the development of society. Marxists hold that the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, the contradiction between the economic base and the political/ideological superstructure built on it, the contradiction between classes, etc. will determine the limits and possibilities of what people can do in a given time and place.

The point here is that it is very useful for revolutionaries to understand the laws of how society develops in general and the laws that guide the functioning of capitalist society in particular.

For example, based on our understanding of crisis theory (why capitalism goes through periodic crises of overproduction), some of us have been arguing that a major economic downturn will take place over the next several years. Coupled with the moves in the political superstructure to slash the social safety net, this will have a very dramatic effect on the urban poor. This in turn has some implications for our organizing.

**Q: Do comrades agree that there are laws of historical development that we can grasp and utilize in our work? Give examples of how this has informed our strategy as an organization.**

## **Marxist Theory of Knowledge**

**4) People's thinking is largely determined by the sum total of social relations that they enter into, or find themselves in.** Conditions, in the main, determine consciousness. This is material-

4) What are the main slogans to mobilize people?

5) How are we going to find the advanced? When we pull around a core of the advanced, what are the points that we want them to stress with the intermediate?

6) What forms of struggle should we advocate in order to strengthen the advanced core? Are they identical with the ones we use to advance the struggle overall?

7) In the course of this fight-back some of the advanced become revolutionary-minded. How do we move them forward to becoming communists?

no obvious force that is moving to take this up. A member of the unit knew a member of the family of the person killed, but this was several years ago and there is no real link right now. Your district has decided that your unit should try and build a campaign.

## Scenario 2

You and your unit are based among state government employees. Because your district has a sound concentration policy, you are all in the same union with the same contract. Because of favorable conditions and good work, the local has been under your leadership for several years.

Here's the problem. An unfolding state budget crisis means the employer is proposing a wage freeze and layoffs. About one fourth of the workers are relatively new, have less of a history with the union, and are very concerned about keeping their jobs. Another fourth are reaching the top of their pay scale, are extremely angry that they are being paid less than other state workers, and have confidence in your leadership. Some of the work areas have excellent stewards and the members very involved in the affairs of the union, but this situation is not universal.

Comrades you have the task of putting together a campaign for the best contract you can get.

## Questions for both scenarios

- 1) What are some of the needed preconditions to make this campaign work?
- 2) Who are we going to try and mobilize and bring forward around this?
- 3) Police murders or layoffs invoke different sentiments among the people. What are the advanced, intermediate and backward sentiments?

ism 101. However under the right conditions, consciousness can impact in a big way on conditions - this is an important point and we will come back to it later.

**5) How do people learn?** Through experience, through practice. Practice is the source of all knowledge. If you are carrying out science experiments, trying to produce things, or trying to change society - the process is basically the same. In the beginning you try something out. If it works you sum that up. If it does not work you sum that up too. From scattered observations, and perceptions you move to concepts - to ideas or theory. This is the first part of what we call cycles of theory and practice.

What is correct theory? Correct theory is when our ideas about how things work accurately reflect reality and its inner motion. How can we be sure if our 'correct' theory is correct? We put it into practice and check the results. By doing this we not only find out if the theory corresponds to reality, but we often can learn something new and further enrich the theory. In a nutshell this process of practice-theory-practice...from knowing a little to knowing a lot is the Marxist Theory of Knowledge.

**6) The general resides in the particular.** In U.S. society there are many contradictions. We have some experiences and have read a few books so we have an awareness of them. However, we need to keep in mind that every general contradiction (for example, class, nationality, gender, etc.) exists in a sum total of the particulars. In the real world the laws of development, the laws of capitalism, always show themselves as a sum total of particulars. The starting point for most people is, "Why won't that supervisor leave me alone," as opposed to, "This is another contradiction between the proletariat and bourgeoisie."

We need to be skilled at using those particulars to draw out a more general picture of what this country is about.

**7) People learn through struggle.** For revolutionaries the implica-

tions of this are tremendous. What is being said is that the fundamental way that people need to learn (and this includes us too) about society and how it works is through the fight to change it. Like Mao said, if you want to know what a pear tastes like, you have to change it by eating it.

This is a reason (not the only reason, but nonetheless a very important one) why communists place such a big emphasis on building the day-to-day struggle in defense of the people's basic interests. We hold that it is through these particular battles that people learn about the nature of the enemy, how this system works and what are the effective methods of struggle. This in turn allows us to: Land blows which weaken and confuse the enemy while winning all that can be won; to accumulate forces for future battles (i.e. to build the respective movements by raising the general level of organization and consciousness) and to create favorable conditions for people to take up revolutionary theory.

**Q: Do comrades agree with this? Clearly many who consider themselves 'leftists' do not. For example the main form of political activity of the Socialist Workers Party (and many of the sects that adhere to the ideas of Trotsky) is selling newspapers. In the same vein there are a number of organizations that say if only we repeat our 'good ideas' long enough and loud enough people will follow.**

## **Methods of Work and Leadership**

**8) Start from where people are at.** Since building the struggle is at the core of our agenda, we can then proceed to outline some key principles and methods of work. The first is that our starting point needs to be the felt needs and wants of the masses of people. Good intentions will not do in this case. They might bring us to the demonstration, but we are likely to be lonely there. So to build struggle, we had better have a handle on what these felt needs are and what people are likely to do in order to achieve them. We have probably all been in meetings where some particular is under dis-

as a whole, is being carried out.

## **Mass Line and Revolution**

**20) Lenin made the point that three factors are needed for revolution.** The people cannot live in the old way, the ruling class cannot rule in the old way, and there must be a strong revolutionary organization. This will take some time.

We are not a large organization, and there will be many twists and turns on the road. There is no reason for us to be boastful at this point in the game. We should be modest and learn from the people as they learn from us. By consistently applying the mass line we can do that. It is a powerful tool for building the struggle, for strengthening the organizations and movements of the people, and constructing revolutionary organization.

We do not know when our class will take power. But we can be absolutely sure that the organization that is at the forefront of the revolutionary process will make use of the mass line.

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## **Discussion for Small Groups**

### **Scenario 1**

You and your unit are now in City X. Your unit has done community work around housing issues, but has limited experience with police brutality work. A Latino man has been killed by the police. This is the latest in a string of police murders, some of which have had more struggle around them than others. The city government suspends the cop with pay, but indicates the cop did nothing wrong.

There are some forces that have done work around police killings in the past, but they are concentrating on other issues now, there is

**18) The objective conditions we are dealing with are not static.** We can change the conditions through our work, through struggle. By interacting with a situation, we become part of it and alter it.

**Q) What can your unit do to create more favorable conditions through its work?**

## **The Marxist Theory of Knowledge is Embodied In Communist Organization**

**19) We are a democratic centralist organization.** We make use of Marxism to analyze the world and what needs to be done. Based on this analysis we develop line, policies and plans. We then put them into practice. If we have a situation in a unit where several different lines are being put into practice at cross purposes, it is not only counter-productive, it is impossible to tell what works and what does not. That is one of the reasons why we insist that the minority is subordinate to the majority and we strive to apply a common plan.

We go through cycles of theory and practice. If, based on the practice, the line proves to be wrong, we sum that up too. In this process the line is changed or improved on. Practice is the sole criterion of truth.

Our structure has a chain of knowledge and chain of command. Lower bodies are subordinate to higher ones. There is more to this than saying our enemies are organized and we have to be to. Hopefully the higher bodies are collecting more knowledge, based on a broader sphere of organized practice than the lower ones, and are in a better position to sum up the work as a whole. For example, a member of a District Committee should take an active interest in all the work of the district. They aren't simply reps of their areas of work. They have the responsibility to see to it that overall line and strategy of the district, and for that matter the organization

cussion, and somebody jumps up and says, "The real issue is X or Y." Maybe that person is extremely insightful or maybe they are dead wrong (more likely). It really does not matter, we need to start from where people are at.

**9) From the masses, to the masses.** *"In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily 'from the masses, to the masses.' This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in action."* (Mao Zedong)

To put this another way, we use Marxism to sum up where people are at. Basing ourselves on what people are concerned about, on what folks actually want, we develop slogans, policies, plans, ways to fight back, that people will take up as their own. It is in this way that revolutionary theory becomes a material force, i.e. when people are acting on it, it moves out of the land of ideas and becomes a material factor in the class struggle. And this is the only way to test whether the theory, analyses, plans, etc. are correct - while creating the basis to deepen the theory.

**Q: People have many wrong ideas. In urban poor work we run across a lot of people who think that the immigrants are getting all the benefits. Among farmers facing bankruptcy it is not unusual to here talk about 'conspiracies of Jewish bankers.' So we have a problem of misidentification of the enemy. Lots of people think we can reason with our opponents and that they would behave differently if they knew what is like 'to be in our place.' So, the question of how we will fight comes up. How do we deal with these wrong ideas when applying this method (from the masses to the masses)? Give examples.**

**10) Struggle for summation.** To pull our work forward we need to be practical leaders and organizers of the people's struggles. This

role is not pre-ordained, it needs to be earned. One implication is that communists need to be waging a constant struggle for summation - both among the active elements and for public opinion in general. To put this another way, after having organized an action or having done something, there will often be different conclusions that people draw from it.

If we are not good at helping people grasp correct conclusions, our enemies will be glad to do it for us. In many of the battles we fight (particularly the larger ones), our victories will be somewhat limited. For example, in dealing with city or state budget crises or major cuts in the social safety net, the best we can often hope for is to blunt the effects. This does not mean that we should not advocate 'not one cent in cuts' - we should. But the reality is we are up against the general laws of capitalism: The rich give with an eyedropper and take away with steam shovel and the only way that many of society's basic problems are going to be addressed is via revolution.

This means that we have to be good at showing people what was accomplished in the course of a particular battle and what this system is about. There is already an attitude that has been drummed into people's heads that goes 'you can't fight city hall.' We need to help people get past that.

Also, in many battles we face a host of opportunists - trade union bureaucrats, poverty pimps and the like - who want to put their own spin on things. In the trade union movement, these fools say, "If only we were nice to the employer, we would not have all these layoffs." If we have done a good job at involving people and constantly explaining to people why the employers behave the way they do, people will reject these Monday morning quarterbacks.

**11) Campaign method.** The enemy is stubborn when it comes down to defending their interests. So a protracted battle is usually called for to get anything. But from the standpoint of people learning about the nature of the system and moving ahead politically, these protracted struggles (i.e. campaigns) provide favorable con-

leaders) and policies and plans which are sharpening the contradictions in the opportunist camp.

Sometimes this process can be quite simple. In the welfare work we say that no progressive organization should support legislation that is fundamentally harmful. Honest people, people who want to fight, agree with this. Dishonest people, opportunists, on the other hand are trying to tinker with the legislation to get a piece of the pie (say daycare lobbyists who support workfare as long as there are dollars for daycare) and can be isolated.

This is not to advocate a 'rule or ruin' approach. The point is that we want to build the strongest possible fight back, and to the extent the opportunists are a barrier to this, we want to divest them of their mass base and remove them from the political stage. The mass line is an important tool for doing this.

## Advanced Actions

**17) Role of advanced actions.** While it is true that consciousness generally moves from a lower to a higher level, and people learn through practice, it is wrong to adopt a formulaic system of stages that we superimpose on the struggle. There is no rule that goes: First we pass out the leaflets, then we have the mass meeting, then we hold the protest, then we seize the offices. etc. Life is more complicated.

Sometimes it happens that the best way to get a campaign going is to unite the advanced to carry out an action (such as a sit-in or visible confrontation with the governor, mayor, etc.). This in turn galvanizes the advanced core, puts up a pole of resistance that others can rally around, and creates a context where we can have a fight for public opinion.

## Create Favorable New Conditions Through Struggle



advanced that new communists will emerge, so this issue has strategic importance as well.

Because this group is so important we need to be flexible. New advanced people might have illusions about the system; we should work patiently with them to correct their rightist mistakes. More long-term advanced may be frustrated and prone to ultra-left errors (getting way ahead of where the people are at). Again, we should stick with them and be patient - summing up what does and does not work in practice.

**Q: Clearly a lot of emphasis is being put on the advanced. Do comrades think this is out of line?**

## **The Mass Line and United Front Work**

**16) Unite all who can be united to fight the enemy.** Leaving aside the strategic question of the united front (issues related to our long term strategy for revolution in this country), in any given struggle we want to unite all who can be united to fight the enemy. Frequently there are other organized forces in the field. Some of these forces are good and honest. Some are led by people who are confused or not entirely stable. And others are lead by straight-up opportunists - we live in a day and age where even the police department has gotten into community organizing.

Clearly, it should not be that hard to unite with those that are honest and good. And while it can be challenging and at times painful to deal with the confused and vacillating, bringing these forces into a united front should not be that mind bending either. However, opportunists and wreckers require special treatment.

By applying the mass line in united front work we can undermine and isolate these elements. The keys are to have a firm line or program that corresponds to the felt needs of the people, an analysis which draws a sharp line of demarcation between the opportunists and the masses (i.e. draw a line between the misled and the mis-

ditions for us to work in.

This is because people in general need repeated experience to learn from. Perhaps folks think that if only the politicians understood what they were doing to people, they would change their ways. So we take people to see the politicians - who do not change their ways - and sum it up with folks. After doing this for a while people conclude that reason just does not work with these elements and something else is called for.

**Q: Do comrades agree that it is important to be building mass campaigns among our respective concentrations? From your experience, why or why not?**

**12) General calls and particular guidance.** At the onset of any campaign, the usual starting point is a general call: "Justice for \_\_\_\_, stop police terror." But we need to be skilled with particular guidance; we need to have some clear ideas about the particulars of what needs to be done. Perhaps this seems self-evident, but we see it happen all the time. A general call is made, but no one has paid any attention to how to solve the particulars, to make it real.

This method is of great help in doing national or regional work. The call can be made. Leadership can pay serious attention to its application in several cities, union locals, neighborhoods, etc. The lessons can then be propagated to others and the basis has been created to learn by example.

**13) Advanced / Intermediate / Backwards.** At any given time and place, the masses are made up of the advanced, the intermediate, and the backwards.

Who are the advanced? The advanced are the active elements, the new leaders, organizers and activists. The main criteria for identifying the advanced must be practice, i.e. activity. Good ideas without corresponding action are useless. This does not mean that there are no political criteria for identifying the advanced, because

depending on time, place and conditions there generally are. As a practical matter, this becomes striking when you have an active person who clings to disruptive and reactionary ideas, or who persists in causing problems. For example in our anti-intervention work we sometimes find extremely active people whom are not happy if we do not agree to paragraphs in the leaflets denouncing this or that Third World leader. Or, if you have the active person that can't rest at night if they are they're not the sole person talking to the press. So political criteria are needed depending what we are doing and what context we are talking about.

Who are the intermediate? They are the majority. The group in the middle. By definition this a group with varied sentiments and contradictory ideas. In most cases, we should design our slogans in such a way, that they appeal to the best sentiments of this group. Being able to move and mobilize this section of the people is often critical to the success of any objective.

Who are the backward? They are naysayers and opposition. Objectively, they generally reflect and articulate the thinking of the enemy in the people's ranks.

These are not moral categories we have dreamed up to make some people feel bad. Rather, we realize that people are in different places. The advanced in one phase of the struggle may become the backward in the next. Recently we were involved in a struggle to organize a large hospital. Upon achieving victory - winning union representation- some leaders (from the ranks of the advanced) took to pushing collaboration with management as a method to secure a first contract. Some people who talked about kicking ass decided to kiss ass, so we have a case where a few advanced people turned into their opposites.

Public opinion is never uniform - among the people in general, in the movements or in our own organization for that matter. We have different tasks in relation to these different groups, but the first step is identifying who is who and what is what.

**14) What are our tasks and method?** To unite the advanced to win over and mobilize the intermediate section which creates conditions to win over, neutralize or isolate the backwards. Even when we get to socialism, the active communists are going to be a relatively small minority so we need to rely on the advanced to get things done. It is the advanced who are the bridge to and lever for moving the majority - the intermediate.

The advanced need to be armed with an understanding that addresses the concerns and questions of the intermediate and practical policies need to be adopted as well.

An example: We and the advanced have come to the conclusion that it is necessary to take a strike vote in the work place. The intermediate think something should be done, but they are nervous. So we let folks know there is a lot of money in the strike fund, we set up special committees that can deal with mortgage companies, we time the strike so that people can still get health coverage for a while. In short, we adopt a series of political and practical measures that convince the intermediate that we can do this and win.

Again this is a practical proposition. To focus a majority of our attention on the backward will not get us anywhere. We would get stuck in an endless debate with the passive or hostile. We could focus our main attention on the intermediate rather than the advanced. What happens then? The best that is going to happen is that we bring forward some new advanced folks and the process of mobilization is slowed down...what will more generally happen is that the advanced you have will slip away.

**15) To lose the advanced is a disaster** and should be avoided at all costs. Not only are the advanced a lever for moving broader numbers of people, they are usually a group of people who we have invested a lot of time and energy in. It often takes years to build up an advanced core in a mass organization and years can be spent replacing it if we lose it. Furthermore it is from the ranks of the