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2016 foreword

The article “Developing Marxist Organization and the Role of Unit” has long been studied inside Freedom Road Socialist Organization. It was written by a leading comrade in the late 1990s to guide an internal campaign to strengthen our organization and to help us in our efforts to integrate Marxism-Leninism with the concrete conditions facing us. At the time, a group of right opportunists inside FRSO had abandoned Marxism and were systematically moving to liquidate our organization. They eventually left FRSO, in part because they objected to this campaign.

We are publishing it now because there will be genuine interest in it. Over the last several years, there has been a real upsurge in the people’s movements and a renewed interest in the science of Marxism-Leninism. Our theory is not an abstract dogma, but a practical guide to organizing in the workplace, in the schools and in the streets. By achieving a thorough understanding of Marxism-Leninism and creatively applying it to the people’s movements, FRSO hopes to build a new communist party capable of uniting the multinational working class and the oppressed nations in the struggle to overthrow the Imperialist class.

Revolutionaries face many questions in the struggle to change society. One of the most important questions is how we can organize ourselves to be effective. We think this paper provides some of the answers to that question.

Key link in moving forward: Developing Marxist organization and the role of units

Campaign to study role of units

Our rules make the point that “the primary units or branches of the organization are the foundation of its work and structure and the main link between the organization and the people.”

Coming into 2nd Congress, an organizational report was prepared which made note of the fact that unit functioning was slipping, in some places drastically.

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While many of our units can and will make tremendous contributions to the mass movements and struggles, it is wrong to take the narrow view that the unit exists “to serve my work.” This is particular true in mixed/heterogeneous units where the members might not be experts on each other areas of work.

Importance of leadership

If you go out sailing it’s important to have someone who knows how to navigate at the helm. How well a unit functions is mainly an issue of how well it is led.

It is wrong to elect someone to unit leadership simply because they have fewer responsibilities in the mass work. Certainly we do need to take into account whether or not a given comrade will put an appropriate amount time and energy into leading a unit well, which in turn means taking into account things like family situation, responsibilities in mass organizations, etc. We do not, however, favor leadership by those with the most leisure time.

Unit leaders should be chosen on the basis of comrades’ confidence in their political leadership. That does not mean they have to do everything, in fact a good unit leader will work to establish a division of labor that involves more of the unit members in the task of developing the unit. For example unit members can be assisted the task of developing and leading studies for the unit. Or members can be assigned the work of carrying out investigations into issues of concern to the unit. Not only does this lighten the workload, but it also helps in bringing forward new leadership.

Looking ahead

The future of our organization depends on the units. We are working to make a leap. The political life of units can be rich and meaningful. They can serve short and long term goals.

It is vital that we clear away the roadblocks to effective unit functioning. From the most recent congress, it is apparent that everyone wants this. It is the responsibility of both the leadership and every cadre to make sure it happens.

One of the goals set by the congress was to bring about a change in this situation. It is impossible to build an M-L organization without well-functioning units.

The purpose of this article is to provide the basis for unit and district level discussion on what we need to do strengthen this basic building block of organization. Some criteria are advanced as to what we should expect from the political life of the units. Some tasks are delineated as well.

Following these discussions, the center will sum up the main points from these discussions, identify and propagate our advanced experience, and will provide guidance as to how to improve things where possible.

We realize that in some cities with a limited number of people, there is no difference between the district-level and unit-level of organization.

Basic building block

We require that every member of our organization be a member of a unit, and there is a good reason for this: the units are the basic building blocks upon which our organization is built. This is true in both a political and organizational sense.

On the organizational side, how can we have districts with a meaningful division of labor, that are developing work among the working class, in the national movements, and among other sections of the people – unless we have functioning units?

The same goes for commissions. A key task of the commissions is to apply our general line (as well as to develop general line for particular areas of work) to the real world. Without units based in that particular area of work, the task would be difficult.

In the final analysis, the same applies for national leadership. Without well-organized units, the national leadership we elect ends up falling back on ties with individuals, and our strengths as a national organization are negated.

In so far as politics and ideology go, the stagnation of units (or worse, their non-existence) is a disaster for revolutionary organization.

Units are key for the development of political line. They are the place where theory meets practice, and in that capacity they play a vital role in building the people's struggle. In addition, they are the main vehicle we have for carrying out Marxist-Leninist education; for raising the political/ideological level of cadre.

Except in very atypical situations (opening of new cities), recruitment and growth is recruitment to and the growth of a given unit. The strategic implications of this are self evident and cover considerable range – from issues of composition (class, national, gender make up) to the fact it is a basic point of Leninism that without a strong revolutionary organization a revolution is not going to be successful.

An organization of fighters

We are not building a debating society for folks that are well paid, well fed, and well educated. We are trying to recruit the activists, organizers and leaders we work with as we build the day-to-day struggles.

The main place we encounter such people is through the course of the work that is under the leadership of the respective units.

Every unit has the task of identifying the advanced around it. It need not be on the agenda of every unit meeting, but it should come up on a regular basis.

Once the advanced are identified, systematic work should be undertaken. A comrade(s) should be assigned the task of talking things over with them so we can get an idea about where they are at. A collective assessment and a plan for recruitment, which will in most cases involve common practice and summation as well as study, should follow this assessment.

A basic point of Lenin's work "What Is To Be Done" is that a socialist consciousness does not come spontaneously to the working class. Another way of looking at this is that if left to its own devices, the working class will never take up Marxism, the science of revolution.

The point here is not that we are the professors and working people are the students. In fact we need to learn as we teach, and remember that we don't know everything.

The construction of units has strategic implication up and down the line. We say that we work for proletarian leadership of the national movements. Without the development of revolutionary organization, including strong units at the base level, this is impossible. If this is not done, it is not possible to build a strategic alliance (between the multi-national working class and the national movements) in any meaningful sense of the term.

The implication here is not that our organization is automatically going to become the party of the working class. Rather the basic point is that a fundamental element in constructing a new communist party, and building a united front against imperialism, under the leadership of the working class, with the strategic alliance at the core of united front, is building well-organized units among the oppressed. No organization will ever stand in the forefront of a revolutionary process in this country without doing this.

Revolution and immediate tasks

The most basic reason for building revolutionary organization is that we believe that without it, we will never succeed in abolishing capitalism and placing our class in power.

Building and consolidating units serves this end. We are not now in a revolutionary situation, nor are we likely to be in one soon. The mass work we are engaged in generally involves resisting this or that attack or getting a positive reform of some kind.

It's our view that in the course of these battles the enemy will be weakened, people's political understanding and level of organization will be raised, and that new revolutionaries will come forward.

Study Marxism

Units are central for raising the political and ideological level of comrades. An important aspect of this is promoting the study of Marxism.

It is not reasonable that people joining our organization go through a recruitment study, and then their training in Marxism (including the basics) comes to an abrupt end.

We hold that society develops according to laws that we can understand. Grasping these laws informs both our strategy and tactics.

For example, we know that imperialism (monopoly capitalism) means war, so we know that our government will always be waging wars or preparing for new ones. From this we can deduce that it is good to have comrades that can relate to, or help lead, local anti-intervention forces.

Time spent carrying out basic Marxist education in the units is time well spent. Not only does it help the day-to-day work, but also it puts comrades in a place where they can better contribute to line development on questions that do not directly affect their work.

It is of particular importance that units organize study on issues that impact on their work. This linking of larger issues of theory with immediate problems or practice is an excellent way for comrades to learn. It serves the day-to-day struggle and our long-term goals.

An organization of the working class

We say that we want to take Marxism home, to bring it to the working class. We have long noted that there is separation, a gulf between the Marxism and working class movements, and that to bring them together is a strategic task.

This process of fusing Marxism and the workers' movement is an important task of our units based in labor (trade unions, urban poor).

Concentrations

As Marxists we hold that, in general, social being determines social consciousness. In other words how people live has a lot to do with the way that they think. The relationship between thinking and being is not static, and at times what people think about things can be of decisive importance.

The category social being encompasses a lot of things; from the way we relate to other people, to the way we relate to the environment. The main way that people, including us, learn is through practice.

As revolutionaries we have to be interested in this topic because we are trying to develop our forces at those points in society where the oppressed are coming in conflict with the enemy – or in some cases the enemy's policies and plans. So for us what is key about social being is the identification of where people are experiencing exploitation and oppression, and as a result are likely to engage in struggle. Based on this we can build the mass movements, create/or develop existing mass organizations, and bring forward new communists. It should also be said that building on, or developing new concentrations has significant strategic implications.

On the most immediate and practical level, the importance of building our units on specific concentrations has been confirmed by our practice.

The units that function the best are those that are leading a specific area of work among a specific group of people. Members can apply Marxism to the situation we face, develop program and plans, and collectively develop political line for the work.

Mixed or heterogeneous units – where members are engaged in different areas of work are always going to be problematic. Our goal is to transform these units, by either moving the comrades into an existing concentration or creating a new concentration (through the recruitment of new forces) upon which we can base a new unit.

To say that we aim to transform these units does not mean that we will not work to maintain and develop them. Rather, the better we are at developing the particular areas of work covered by these units, and recruiting new people into them – which is linked to how well they function – the sooner these heterogeneous units will be transformed into unit with specific concentrations.

Marxist Theory of Knowledge and the development of political line

To say that units are the main place where theory meets practice is to say that units are fundamental to the development of political line.

As Mao noted, correct ideas come into being in the course of the class struggle, the struggle for production, and scientific experiment. They do not fall out of heaven.

Comrades who are leading particular areas of work are in the best position to see what works and what does not. They can use Marxism, sum up lessons from the work and apply those lessons to the struggle. Based on objective criteria we can then sum up how we did.

Did we weaken and confuse our enemies? Were the mass organizations strengthened? Did we raise the general level of consciousness? And, did any of the activists, organizers, or leaders, take up the science of Marxism-Leninism and join our ranks?

The Marxist Theory of Knowledge deals with how people learn. It states that there are cycles of practice and theory, where our understanding of how things work moves from a lower to a higher level. To put this another way, based on our practice we develop political line, which is then deepened through more cycles of practice and the application of theory.

Centers of struggle

Every unit should strive to be a center of struggle. When possible units should discuss the strategy to be adopted by the mass organizations we lead or play a role in, and try to unite people around that strategy. They should sum up and propose solutions to problems that come up in the work.

This does not mean we are the bosses telling everyone else what to do nor are we trying to substitute ourselves for the mass organizations. What this means is that we will use Marxism to move things forward. We learn from others and try to unite the advanced around a solid line.

Our leading role is not something that is preordained. Leadership is earned. How well we are able to play this role with have a lot to do with whom we recruit.

Democratic Centralism

Communist organization is an organizational embodiment of the Marxist Theory of Knowledge. Summations of practice and views move from lower bodies to higher bodies, and are returned in the form of political line, concrete guidance, policies, etc.

If the units don't work, this chain of knowledge, chain of command is broken, and the ability of the organization to develop correct political line is weakened.

Without a working chain of knowledge, Democratic Centralism cannot work. The central leadership cannot have an all-sided analysis of what is happening in the real world. This interferes with line development. In the end the centralist aspect (unity around line and action) also disappears.

Units and the mass line

That the masses are the makers of history is what lies at the core of the mass line. The basic method is that we take the scattered, unsystematic ideas of the masses, about what are the problems, who is the enemy, and how shall we fight, and use M-L to develop slogans, organization forms, methods of struggle, etc. If our proposals are correct, people will take up these proposals as their own.

Theory becomes a material force when it grasped by the broad masses of people.

Units with solid concentrations are critical to this process.