

Cadre, Growth and Political Practice in Socialist Alternative

“While it is true that we [Sydney Branch] held a more systematic programme of reading groups than most other branches, abstract education, and formal educational work alone, will not turn the newest member into a revolutionary activist.” – September 2003¹

Socialist Alternative (SA) is a small group that exists on the margins of society. Its function is develop and cohere a *Marxist Cadre* that can contribute to the formation of a revolutionary workers party, like the Russian Bolsheviks.

The development of a cadre should therefore be the determinant of our activity. At present, our strength or weakness as an organisation is judged largely in terms of numerical growth.

While we must seek growth, *qualitative* growth must be seen as more central than *quantitative*. Otherwise, we fall in to the trap of thinking that the accumulation of ‘ones-and-twos’ is sufficient for our real development as a political tendency. This can only allow us to eke out an existence on the fringes of political life, and the methods involved do not necessarily train us in the necessarily skills and approach to grow when the pace of struggle picks up.

In SA, there tends to be an assumption that more or less any group with a few hundred members can usefully participate in an upturn and grow qualitatively. Yet the history of the left is littered with groups that have failed to do so, in large part because of political and organisational habits developed during periods of ‘survival’.

In this document I’m going to look at what a Marxist cadre is, how it is developed and look at the practices and habits of our organisation in that light.

What is a Marxist cadre?

The term cadre is derived from a military analogy. The word means officer. The cadres of an army are the officer corps that lead particular actions, and translate experiences on the ground to the general staff, and directions from the general staff to the troops.

This is an approximation of the political function of cadres. Any political movement needs them, it is the layer of people who really carry a movement, the glue that holds it together and makes mass action a real possibility.

What are the characteristics of Marxist cadres? The first, and in some respects most important characteristic, is that they are *leaders* in the world outside the group. Secondly they must understand and have integrated into their thinking, to some degree, the politics of Marxism.

A useful concrete discussion of cadre is in Trotsky’s *History of Russian Revolution*, in his analysis of the February Revolution. In asking the question ‘Who led the February Revolution?’, Trotsky draws the

conclusion that it was the Bolshevik worker comrades, acting without, and in many cases despite, direction from the party centre. This was possible because they were capable of independently figuring out what needed to be done, without waiting for guidance from the centre. These were the leaders in the factories, the workers that others looked to.

Without these people, and their capacity to independently apply Marxist politics in a concrete mass movement, leading others with them, the Russian Revolution would have been an impossibility.

Cadre Development in SA

In Socialist Alternative, we tend to exaggerate the importance of the element of ideological education in the abstract, of what we might call ‘book learning’, at the expense of the element of leadership. We see the development of cadres primarily in terms of the development of people who have participated in a number of reading groups, understand the politics in the abstract, and can reproduce, more or less faithfully, the content of various key texts. As one Melbourne organiser remarked recently, cadre is developed by ‘getting people to read the magazine and having meetings on the Spanish Elections’. The propaganda routine that is at the core of our strategy for growth reinforces this approach, by emphasising activities that are largely separated from the rest of the political world, and whose content is in fairly abstract or general ideas.

We thus see both growth and the development of a cadre as largely a self-reproducing process. Book learning occupies centre stage, rather than gaining political experience. While this aspect is important, and all comrades should read and discuss our ideas as part of developing their ideas, there are two major weaknesses in this approach.

Firstly, one can never really understand Marxism in the abstract. Sure, you can reproduce certain formulas (the centrality of the working class, men don’t benefit from sexism, etc) and the like, possibly even win some arguments. But until experience in the political world has given comrades a concrete feel for how it all hangs together, we can never creatively apply them, never do more than a more or less elaborate replay of stuff we’ve read. Marxists need to be able to creatively engage with all sorts of situations, questions, disagreements, etc, and relate to others not just in terms of abstract formulas, but actually give these ideas flesh from experience. This needs to go further even than an accumulation of witty anecdotes that explain an idea, but to some idea of how the ideas might apply in the detailed situation that faces activists in campaigns.

¹ *Problems in the Sydney Branch*, Marc Newman, September 2003

The history of our group is full of debates with other tendencies where we have sharply attacked the habit of repeating formulas.

Without being able to elaborate the case systematically, and the way that it can be applied, including being flexible about secondary details, the formal ideas are basically useless, and in some sense are a barrier to having a serious discussion with other activists.

Secondly, one learns to lead by *leading*. Within SA, we have the approach of immersing comrades in a political routine, fairly narrowly conceived, of propaganda work. The 'basics' consist of doing stalls, attending meetings, putting up posters, leafleting, paying dues, etc. Only when these self-generated, internalised activities (what we sometimes called 'make work' in the old days) have been satisfied are members encouraged to engage in any work outside the organisation.

Leadership in the big, wide world

However, there are other aspects, which are rarely emphasised in our group, of our membership requirements – membership in your trade union and participation in campaigns. In campaigns, members can learn how to work alongside others, can gain experience at approaching real political work from a Marxist point of view, in answering people's questions about revolutionary politics, and most importantly in *contending for leadership* of the campaign. This is also true of trade union work, if conducted on a serious basis.

This development is essential to the development of Marxist cadre, because a Marxist cadre is precisely a layer of people who are actually immersed in the struggle for leadership in real work *outside* the confines of the organisation. As Draper puts it, the organisation needs to be part of the class movement, not because of some theoretical article of faith or conscious effort, but *because it lives there*.

In our discussions of Leninism we speak of an 'organisation of leaders'. This is not some metaphysical abstraction but an actual description of what a Marxist cadre organisation needs to be like. This means that SA needs to work to transform itself into an organisation whose members lead outside, and consequently, whose discussions within the organisation have a real impact on parts of the social movements, the campuses and the class.

Put bluntly, our experience of this kind of leadership is limited. Many in the group will argue that this is simply because we are small. However, leadership, the capacity to lead, is not simply a function of the size of a group. Groups with many members can be incapable, because of the calibre and training of those members, of exercising real leadership in a campaign, and similarly smaller groups composed of people who are experienced and embedded in a layer of activists can play a significant role.

Concrete examples of this can be found in the role played by Fleur and Jerome in both the Jabiluka campaign and the refugee campaign, or by individual comrades like Jill in the union at work (where she is currently working with others to lead a struggle over mass, anti-union sackings).

So leadership and the experience gained from it are not simply a function of size, and we need to be clear about the central role that a handful of comrades *can* play.

The focus of our organisation's efforts, however, are not in this area. Very few of our members have ever had the experience of immersing themselves in campaign groups, the milieus around them, and having to deal with the problems and the small triumphs associated with it.

This is generally excused by saying that a small group can't lead anything. However, revolutionary leadership is not simply a question of 'having the forces', to direct or dictate mass struggles. Certainly it would be good if we had those forces. Size matters, but the ability to lead requires an organic relationship between those who aspire to lead and those in the movement. There is thus a much more atomic process of revolutionary leadership that underlies this kind of 'mass revolutionary leadership'.

We need to become an organisation composed of people who have the *propensity to embed themselves in groups of activists and figure out how to apply Marxism to the questions that arise in struggle*. This is an essential underlying part of that mass leadership. And *that* doesn't require mass numbers to be developed – in fact an organisation that doesn't learn how to do this when it is small, has Buckley's chance of relating to large numbers of activists when upturn does develop. They'll be left on the sidelines.

A Profile of our campus work

On the campuses which are, after all, the core area of our work at the moment, our work is very patchy. As in general, our work revolves around 'the basics'. Members are, in general, recruited as raw people in their 'ones-and-twos', and then 'integrated', more or less successfully in each case, into a propagandist routine. They are fed a diet of book-learning, and, generally speaking, are kept isolated from the rest of the left. Most of us know that part of the function of the organisers, as the leadership sees it, is as 'shepherds' of these members, to prevent them from going astray.

Into this basic stock of work is occasionally (although only in second place to the routine) injected some campaign work. This consists of attending campaign meetings, and arguing the line. Generally, if someone can't make both an SA caucus and the campaign meeting, because of time limitations, they are told to come to the caucus. Few members are let out of the leaders' sights long enough, and the 'stick is bent' so far in the direction of the 'basics', that few members respond to calls to undertake tasks for the campaign, for fear that they will be dressed down for not fulfilling

enough of the 'basics', or for being a specimen of 'movementism'.

Under these circumstances, the members who are taken out of the propaganda routine and injected into a campaign, are *mistrained*. They get little real experience of being part of the milieu of activists around a campaign, and generally speaking are regarded with suspicion if they do speak up, because their money is not where their mouths are (the limited work that is done as part of the routine is usually not *seen* by anyone outside our ranks). And of course, this rubs off on the group as a whole – and so it should, since it is the product of a systematic approach.

In this situation any idea that we might be *contending for leadership* of the campaign is made a complete mockery of. We don't achieve as much as we might in terms of practical support for the campaign, and perceptions of a 'raid mentality' are generated, since the one aspect that is performed with vigor by the organisers and some of the 'basics' trained members is the contact follow up at the end of the meeting.

But even in this last respect we are often self-defeating. Someone approached with care, worked alongside in a campaign environment, for whom socialist politics is not broached as if it popped out of a UFO from Mars, but in the context of real issues in the campaign, which are usually legion, is often not only recruitable, but a *better* recruit. These people recruited on a far more serious and long term basis. Instead, closing the deal and getting someone to a socialist meeting or to sign a red card is seen as the central task. The basic attitude is: "What matter if they're turned over in three months, there's always turnover in small socialist groups isn't there? And after all, it's the period..." This attitude is widespread, and highly problematic.

Our approach to campaigns has consequences for the internal practices of the group and the development of members, and the internal practices also shape the external work. It is therefore necessary to look at the internal environment in the group as well.

Members, Turnover and 'Professionalism'

We are not living through the 1960s. The problem of turnover is a real one even for the most healthy group. The question is, whether we are adequately dealing with the problem politically, or whether our practices exacerbate the difficulties caused by the period.

When I remarked recently to a comrade that the Sydney branch was particularly bad in this respect, having turned-over fully 50% of its members from last June by January of this year, they said not to worry, this was also the case in Melbourne.

The organisation ends up shifting to a focus on getting the numbers, on signing up people, rather than developing more socialists. The emphasis is on scalps, rather than politics.

The net outcome of this is that membership does not come as the logical end of a process of political development, and as a formalisation of an actually

existing political relationship. Instead, people are signed up when they do not yet understand the implications, and as often as not freak out under the pressure of the expectations that we place on them, virtually by stealth. This simply inflates the turnover, to no great effect.

But in this context, it is hoped, a few will 'make the transition' to being more serious, and, in essence, that the function of the rest is to provide those few with a rank-and-file to practice on. Some leadership comrades used to be explicit that we 'developed cadre' by sicking the upincomers on dissidents. Socialism 2004 furnishes significant evidence that this notion is alive and well. This feeds the creation of a two or three tier membership in which the serious members don't take the rank-and-file very seriously, and so adopt a command mentality, rather than one based on proper political leadership.

In this environment, a pressure toward 'professionalisation' is created, since the 'unserious' members can't be relied upon to carry many of the tasks that are necessary to running the organisation. When I joined back in 1997, there was a much more conscious orientation to getting comrades in various areas of work to take responsibility for organising their own stuff. In the new professionalised environment, much activity is centralised and then foisted onto organisers and office staff. We thus have a very high demand for more people prepared to be full-time.

In SA we have had a hard time finding enough members prepared to be full-time to satisfy the demand. As a result, the age of the organisers is getting lower and lower. While this has superficial advantages, it also means the experience, political depth, maturity and subtlety of our organisational core and apparatus is also falling.

Thus we are constantly hearing talk of how 'stretched' the organisational resources of the group are – meaning that because our rank-and-file are increasingly transient, and take little responsibility for the work, the leaders are under pressure to make up the gap. However, there is little discussion of the ways in which substituting for the membership can help to generate a passive membership.

Relatively experienced members then end up torn between two, equally one-sided forms of involvement in the group. On the one hand, those who become part of the professionalised apparatus of the group. On the other, those who, unable to stomach the peculiar and internalised environment in the organisation, withdraw to the somewhat 'naughty' fringes of our activity outside the mainstream of the student work – union involvement, sometimes campaigns or outlying campuses. The former group are unable to take groups of comrades and train them in work in the external world, since they are increasingly bound to performing the over-centralised routine work, and the others are increasingly alienated from the leadership and apparatus.

So, far from successfully developing a broader layer of Marxist leaders, we are in fact turning over newer comrades at an alarming rate, and are not developing cadres at a rate fast enough to replace the two-thirds of the founding members that we have lost over the last eight years. Other comrades are forcibly marginalised, and treated like pariahs. So we aren't exactly taking the strides (or even really shuffles) forward that we're supposed to be.²

Leadership and our Internal Culture

1. Substitution

One feature of our internal environment is that the first response of the organisers and leadership people is not to address weaknesses in organisation politically, but rather by simply throwing themselves into the breach.

One classic example of this, from the routine itself, is the branch talks in Sydney. In the middle of last year I raised the alarm that the branch and club talks were being done disproportionately by organisers and BC members – and given a BC of four this is a major problem. At conference I raised this again, and now, in March-April of 2004, we are still having at least 3 out of the last 4 branch talks done by BC members, despite the fact that there are several offers standing of members who will give talks. Moreover, 2 in the last 5 weeks were done by the same person!

Members putting their hands up can help, but this can only be addressed by the leadership and apparatus making a fundamental turn in the way that they think through and allocate tasks, seeking always to bring more members into this activity rather than always focusing on logistical efficiency, people need to start looking at them politically.

2. Patiently explain, or not...

Numerous ex-members, or peripheral members, and some who are still more centrally involved can attest to the fact that their attitude to the group and low morale is significantly impacted by the fact that they are treated like idiots or children by the organisers, and not infrequently chewed out for ridiculous things or minor misdemeanors. Most members would know instances of this where people get attacked for something as small as talking to a non-contact for a few minutes on a stall, or even talking to other members.

This behaviour is good neither for the members, in whom it breeds disaffection or docility, nor for the leaders, in whom it ingrains habits that no-one in the real world will accept – and consequently makes our 'leaders' incapable of real leadership.

The lack of experience also results in a 'dumbing down' of the politics that we discuss, something we

² From Socialism 2003 to 2004, we in fact had a 10% fall in registrations (220 to 200 people). More alarming was that since our member registrations went up, our periphery has shrunk significantly in the intervening year. People commented at conference that the level of the discussions, despite some encouraging exceptions, was by-and-large lower than 2003. Not to mention the quite insane internal environment that surrounded the sessions.

used to be sharply critical of the ISO for. Organisers and lower-ranking leaders understand less of the politics, or are unprepared to patiently explain sufficiently, that we end up reproducing a bowdlerised version of Marxism, based on soundbites, not ideas.

A return to the practice, much more common in the early years of the group, of having much lengthier, detailed conversations with members, and a higher degree of patience about members responses is necessary. The reality is that nothing about the urgency of our work can justify the kinds of headkickings that have become the norm in the group.

3. An internalised pattern of involvement where a large proportion of members aren't getting much experience of involvement outside the group.

The bulk of our members in Sydney (and it seems to be the case in Melbourne, though not so much in Brisbane) are not involved on a serious basis in any external campaign work.

A part of this is simply time constraints – the quite demanding regime of 'basics' already occupy so much of their time that they don't feel they can push any further, but it is also a product of the political emphasis.

The members are repeatedly told, and argued to, that the 'basics' are infinitely more important than campaign work. Essentially, that non-'basics' aren't important to building the group, and so a sectarian counter-position is set up between the organisation's routine and campaign work, in which the latter generally drops off the to-do list.

On many campuses we are now the largest left group, but on how many campuses are our members real leaders of the major campaigns on that campus or elsewhere?

The only corrective to this is to have a rounded discussion of what we are doing in a cadre group, and of what is necessary to developing cadres. In the short term, consciously abandoning the extraordinarily one-sided idea that the routine always takes priority over external work would be a start.

4. A culture in which our work is rarely, if ever, systematically discussed, and political lessons, positive or negative, drawn out.

There was a major fight within the group over the undemocratic process and sectarian content of the Socialist Left proposal which, to this day, has never been discussed in any forum, certainly in Sydney, but I've heard no evidence that it has anywhere else. This is merely one instance, there are others.

How can members form an informed attitude to various, quite important, questions of our organisation's politics and culture if there is never any discussion of it? How are they to learn to respond to criticisms in the external world, if they never have to

respond to debates within the group? In the example that I raised above, which has significant implications for the ongoing conduct of our student work, how many members can honestly say that they understand, or even know the positions that were put?³

The recent turn to the Labor students in the education campaign, follows the arguments that underlie the proposal to split the NBL and form a Socialist Left faction in NUS. This question was never resolved one way or the other. Under the impact of arguments from those opposed to the split, and the fact that no-one much outside our organisation was interested, the NE was forced to retreat. However, the underlying *politics* of this sectarian mistake are the same. This is an instance of *pragmatic shifting*,⁴ essentially, manoeuvring when a retreat from a position is necessary, in order to preserve the political basis of it.

Debates about our work, conducted systematically and openly are essential to the development of a cadre. As Mick A, Sandra B and I wrote:

"A revolutionary party cannot possibly be created except on a thoroughly democratic basis; unless in its internal life vigorous controversy is the rule and various tendencies and shades of opinion are represented, a socialist party cannot rise above the level of a sect. Internal democracy is not an optional extra. It is fundamental to the relationship between party members and those amongst whom they are politically active. The point is well illustrated by Isaac Deutscher in a discussion of the Communist Parties in the 1930s:

"When the European Communist went out to argue her case before a working class audience, she usually met there a social democratic opponent whose arguments she had to refute ... Most frequently she was unable to do this, because she lacked the habits of political debate, which were not cultivated within the Party ... She could not probe adequately into her opponents case when she had to think all the time about her own orthodoxy ..."

*The ineffectiveness of the Stalinist agitation was one of the main reasons why, over many years ... that agitation made little or no headway against social-democratic reformism."*⁵

We have precisely the same problem. Our educational efforts train members to restate orthodoxy, but not to "probe into ... opponents arguments", not to respond in a real way to debates in the world.

We certainly don't promote democratic debate of our work within the group. In fact, it is frowned upon, as a matter for the leadership.

³ The NE recently claimed that 'it is true that the NE's arguments prevailed' and that I 'should admit that [I] lost the argument'. In fact neither of these things is true, however I will address this significant row in a separate document.

⁴ See for instance, 1988 Letter to Australian IS from British SWP.

⁵ Quoted from *Lenin and the Party, Debunking the Myths*, Mick Armstrong, Sandra Bloodworth and Marc Newman, Socialist Alternative, 2000

A reorientation of our branches away from being purely public affairs, to actually being the hub of our organisation, and making the space for discussions of our work would be a beginning.

5. *The development of a two or three tier membership*

One consequence of the 'hard core' 'soft rank-and-file' view of our membership, is that simple 'membership' becomes fairly meaningless. In fact, to have an impact on the direction of the group, you need to be adopted into the network of organisers and committees. Members are increasingly seen as, and trained to be, passive.

The people at the top increasingly see themselves as the 'real' members, and justify to themselves foisting decisions made behind closed doors as in the group's best interests – even if the members are too new to see it. In fact, this was explicitly argued to me all last year by NE members in Sydney – that it was irresponsible to take any disagreements to the branch, since the members were too new to have a worthwhile opinion!

This is, of course, reinforced by a highly transient membership.

Opening up discussions, being concerned to explain to members what is at stake in a debate or practice, rather than shielding them from it, would be a useful starting point in this. Bringing more of our work and political decisions into the branch would also help to correct this problem.

6. *A systematic policy of self isolation as a milieu*

Let us consider the orthodoxy in SA:

- a. We require commitment, first and foremost, to the narrow organisational requirements of a propaganda routine.
- b. Our official policy is that the rest of the left is an obstacle and it would be good if it didn't exist. We therefore deliberately set ourselves apart from the rest of the left on campus, seeking to abstain wherever we can get away with it, from broad left formations, and sometimes trying to disrupt those that do exist.
- c. A similar policy of deliberate abstention prevails with respect to the trade union movement, where members are expected *not* to integrate themselves into the limited milieus of activists and militants, who exist almost exclusively in and around the bureaucracy.

The Communist Party had not only a significant number of members but also a network of non-member fellow-travellers who would work with 'the Party' and follow its lead under most circumstances. SA needs to learn that if we don't try to carry people outside our ranks, we will never be more than a sect, no matter how large we get. Socialist revolution is not the act of an organisation, but rather of a class. The relationship between a milieu of sympathisers and organisers is cemented through a real Marxist cadre which is

embedded in work *outside* the organisation, alongside those sympathisers.

The Socialist Left proposal is merely one moment in this quite generalised practice in the organisation, and we need a conscious and systematic break with it.

Conclusions – Swimming Against the Stream

The organisation has a range of deeply seated, interconnected political and cultural problems. None of these are clearly matters of formal politics. Nor do they neatly fit into the category of an analysis of the period.

We could debate the perspective until the cows come home, but the reality is that much of our organisational culture is *not* seen by the NE as dependent on the political situation. The regime that they have advocated in the group has been largely unchanged for 15 or more years. It also draws heavily on the forms that prevailed in the IS in the late 1980s, in fact we are now using a pamphlet on organisation that dates from the notorious Gung-Ho period⁶ as part of our program of reading groups in Sydney. And this despite significant shifts in the political situation and the groups perspective that have occurred in that time.

The bottom line is that a group's assumptions about how you build a revolutionary organisation and develop a Marxist cadre have an impact that colours your work irrespective of your assessment of the political situation. For a correct perspective to give you a correct practice, you need correct assumptions.

In SA, 'recruitment on the basis of ideas' has come to mean an emphasis on abstract propaganda, and on self-reproducing activity. The idea of revolutionary theory, tradition and ideas being part of living movements has been buried. This important issue needs to be discussed further in subsequent forums and documents.

Political clarity is needed about more than just what the key question in political life is. We also need political clarity about formal politics, about strategic questions, about how to build a group, and about how our approach to building a group intersects with what we think about the political situation. By deeming everything but perspectives 'apolitical', there has been an attempt to stop us gaining political clarity about these broader questions.

No-one disputes that the period is not the most amazing for socialists. No-one is suggesting a return to the hyper-optimism of the early 1990s ISO. This period generates pressures on socialists that mean that some people will drop out, not every contact will join, etc.

But in every historical period, people decide what they're going to do, groups decide how they are going to act, not in some deterministic way, but according to the ideas in their heads and the pressures around them. In the present situation, socialists can either resist the pressures to drop out, resist the factors that limit our

opportunities in the external world, that isolate us, and treasure the opportunities that do exist or they can passively accept or even reinforce that isolation. In short, we can either swim against the stream, or we can drift along with it.

To do this, our organisation needs to refocus on developing a Marxist cadre. Firstly by shifting the focus of members activity away from self-generated activity, toward external activity, and secondly by opening up its internal structures to facilitate debates among these developing activists. While the gains in the short term will be limited, it will help us to ensure a politically healthier, more vibrant and developed membership when the political situation shifts

Marc Newman

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⁶ The Gung-Ho period was a time of 'hyperorganisation' in the IS. A large ratio of organizers to members, a high level of regimentation of social and domestic lives, making the group essentially a cult.