

# Evaluation of Regroupment Process

The IS at its Convention in the Summer of 1982 adopted a regroupment perspective aimed at bringing together individuals, collectives and national organizations of the revolutionary left, as well as newly radicalized activists with the ultimate aim of creating a new, multi-tendenced revolutionary socialist group. About seven months have elapsed since that perspective was adopted. Seven months is not enough time in which to test, prove or disprove a perspective. But we feel it is appropriate and important to have an initial evaluation of the process in order to determine how it has affected the revolutionary left and the IS, how far it has gone in accomplishing our goals, and what we must do at this time to carry out the regroupment process more effectively.

## Context

The regroupment perspective was adopted by the IS on the basis of an assessment of the broad political context in which the social movements and the revolutionary left exist. In the paper "Regroupment: A Revolutionary Socialist Perspective," Kim wrote:

For the first time in years, there is a sense of a movement in the making — not just a series of events, but a genuine mass movement.

It was felt that "... the birth of these movements provides a focus for the left that has been lacking until now." (Italics in original) Given these movements "... as always happens in mass movements, revolutionary ideas will again become current." So, the basis for thinking that a revolutionary regroupment would be a possibility was the rebirth of movements, creating radical currents which would be a focus of activity and debate for the left which could raise revolutionary ideas.

## The Movements

The regroupment perspective document specifically describes or alludes to several movements:

1) **Polish Solidarnosc.** The spectacular growth of a militant labor movement in one of the so-called "socialist" countries, a movement which became an inspiration for labor and left activists around the world was part of the backdrop to regroupment. We worked with a variety of left and labor militants in support of Polish Solidarity, we saw the confirmation of our "Third Camp" world view yet again, and saw that world view adopted — even if unconsciously — by other radicals. Daniel Singer produced *The Road to Gdansk* sharing our outlook.

2) **Nuclear Disarmament.** Kim pointed to the "explosive birth of the European disarmament movement." "The ideas of this movement, including those of its Marxist thinkers, will have a profound influence on political activists in America," he argued.

3) **Anti-War.** Kim also argued in that document that Reagan and U.S. policy in Central America and beyond were "... also creating a new, vital and potentially explosive anti-war movement in the U.S." around the issues of nuclear disarmament and U.S. intervention in Central America.

4) **Black activism.** And while placing less emphasis on this point, Kim wrote that "there is also a revival of Black activism, expressed through NBUF and NBIPP."

## Reversal of Fragmentation

These movements, their radical currents and the socialist activists within them provided the context for regroupment of the revolutionary left. Regarding the left itself, the document adopted by the I.S. Convention pointed out that while the left was "in a state of disarray, fragmentation and confusion" as Reagan took power, that there were also the first "positive signs" of "a perceptible reversal of fragmentation" on the left.

It was also observed that "groups and individuals are more cooperative, quicker to seek out joint work... and generally more friendly."

At the same time the document took notice of the fact that much of this good will took place in a situation in which the left felt powerless before Reaganism and represented a reorganization of groups which "... has also meant a political move to the right."

## The Process

Given the political context, the nature of the movements and the resources of the I.S., the Convention document argued that "it makes most sense for the I.S. to orient primarily toward the trade union left and the new student activists." The successful conferences organized by the labor paper and the Progressive Student Network (PSN) were seen as the milieu in which the regroupment would take place, as well as in the anti-nuclear and anti-war areas.

The document proposed a new sort of regroupment process crossing the lines of political traditions and including even new radical activists.

The new approach to regroupment is an open, public series of socialist forums, and joint activities in which a wide variety of socialist viewpoints are expressed on a broad range of topics, not just on regroupment itself.

It was felt that "trade unionist, women and minority revolutionaries" should be involved as early as possible.

The process was to include, in addition to the public forums, literary discussions and joint work. National conferences were also foreseen.

## The Role of the I.S.

We recognized from the beginning that since this was our proposal, we would have to take the initiative in order to convince others that the idea of regroupment was possible and worthwhile. We also knew that we would have to take the initiative because we were fortunate to be one of the few groups on the revolutionary left with the resources, functioning organizational center, political stability and loyal membership which was able to undertake such work.

Consequently, following the adoption of this perspective at the Convention the P.C. hired Dan to work at first part-time and now full-time for the I.S., most of that time on the regroupment project. The IS also hired another person to work one day a week on the project. During the first six months of the regroupment period Dan traveled about 50 days for the group. Meetings were organized in about a dozen cities in the Midwest and East. We attend-

ed conferences of other organizations, met with leaders of other groups, met with individuals, engaged in political discussions and held living room meetings. In addition we produced several pieces of literature dealing with regroupment. IS leaders and members, along with friends of the I.S. have helped out in making contacts, setting up meetings and furthering the discussion.

The P.C. through discussion of the various meetings, and in political discussion with other groups had seen the regroupment process as taking place in two stages:

1) **Exploration.** Establishing contacts with individuals, collectives and national organizations; deepening relations with groups with which we had previously worked; and general furthering good will. The I.S., it was understood, would take most of the responsibility for stage 1.

2) **Going public.** On the basis of better relations with old friends, making new friends, more joint work, deeper political discussions, etc, we hoped to go forward to a second stage of public discussion. We expected that at this stage other left groups would take on more responsibility for the regroupment process.

#### Not As We Expected

We now find, after seven months, that the regroupment perspective is not going as we expected. Before going into the specifics of why this or that aspect of the regroupment tactics have succeeded or failed, we think it is important to put things in perspective.

First, while June 12 put almost a million people in the streets, the demonstration did not seem to build as spectacular a movement as we had hoped. Much of its energy went into the local electoral freeze initiatives with no new directions emerging since the elections in November. For now it remains too early to make any predictions about exactly where and when the movement will massively re-emerge.

Second, the anti-war movement (that is, the movement against U.S. intervention in Central America) has grown, but not as rapidly as we expected. The U.S. has taken no new highly visible measures in Central America — though it has been confirmed that the U.S. is involved in attempts to "destabilize" Nicaragua through military aid to right wing forces. However, there has been no dramatic regionalization of the war. There is just business as usual: support for right-wing dictators against popular rebellions — like the resumption of military aid to Guatemala. These are sinister steps, but not the kind that bring tens or hundreds of thousands of Americans into the streets.

Third, Black activity remains, with the notable exception of Overtown, in primarily mainstream community organizing and electoral channels: Unity Line (NY), Mel King (Boston), Harold Washington (Chicago).

Fourth, Polish Solidarity which provided some of the inspiration, ideas and an arena for our work suffered a crushing defeat with Jaruzelski's martial law regime, the arrest of tens of thousands and the outlawing of the union. Solidarity did not produce an insurrectionary, revolutionary wing, so far as we know. The militant labor movement did not spread to other Eastern European countries or to Russia. With its defeat, Solidarity moved off the front page.

If we look at other areas we see that the movement is stagnant. The Progressive Student Network is slowly shrinking in size. The Reproductive Rights National Net-

work (R2N2) finds that it is running into problems as a single issue (abortion/sterilization) group. They would like to be the left-wing of the women's movement but haven't figured out how to do it.

While there are signs of hope in the anti-concessions movement in the unions, the rebel forces within it remain on the defensive. The left in the unions is still disoriented and lacks the political self confidence.

Prolonged recessionary conditions have disoriented the labor movement and, as a consequence, the left. Under certain conditions economic crisis offers a great opportunity to the left. In the early 1930s, when organizations like the CP and SP had thousands of worker members, crisis was the opportunity for mass mobilizations — first the unemployed, then the employed. Now however, a fragmented left is unable to come up with any clear or united program and lacks the roots to pull off *large scale* and *independent* mobilizations.

The feeling of dependence on larger forces (labor bureaucrats, Democrats) has disoriented much of the left. Futile searches for the perfect program, and illusions about big name figures have grown. The lack of answers coming from those (big name) quarters points towards the potential demise of this short term disorientation. But in this immediate period, the effect of recession has been negative for the regroupment process.

The point of all of this is not that mass movements will never take shape. The analysis of the I.S. Convention document could hardly be held to a seven month timetable. Indeed, we have every reason to believe that the political situation in the world and in the U.S. will produce such movements. They have not yet gained the sort of momentum needed to produce joint work, to test old and abstract positions, to put revolutionary ideas back in the forefront, or otherwise provide the wind in the sails that can make regroupment more concrete. Without the kind of activity, optimism, solidarity and rethinking that mass social movements always force on the left, new perspectives like regroupment lack the urgency needed to move people in new directions.

#### Continued Disintegration

It is not surprising then that instead of the fragmentation of the left being overcome, it is instead continuing and worsening. The DSA/NAM merger has not led to that group becoming a strong pole of attraction in the left. The change in Democratic Party rules, loss of Kennedy as a presidential candidate in 1984, means that it is an organization without a perspective or strategy for the time being and cannot hope to grow until it reorients itself.

The Maoist left continues to deteriorate. The various regroupment attempts between RWH and CPML, RWH and PUL and others have all failed. The RWH is now only an East Coast organization with Midwest and West Coast affiliates. The CPML is little more than a mailing list for local organizations. PUL has held together organizationally, but is currently involved in an internal discussion about its politics and future course.

The orthodox Trotskyist left is fragmenting as well. The SWP is involved in an internal faction fight which threatens to blow up soon. While part of this is about the increasingly Stalinist Castroite character of SWP politics (the SWP now praises Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada as workers' and peasants' states) part of it is about problems

common to other sections of the left, such as the failure of the SWP's "turn" to the working class.

For much of the left, the continued fragmentation has a specific political content as well. Its adaptations to today's difficult political atmosphere are largely in a rightward direction. The 1982 elections drew in much of the revolutionary left as well as those sections of the reformist left who habitually see revolution in the election of every liberal. All manner of "pop front" illusions blossomed. Many viewed these elections as a crusade against the Right. The larger the threat of Reaganism loomed, the more irrelevant revolutionary ideas seemed to much of the left. Again, the absence of mass movements, or their channelling into respectable invisible forms, reduced confidence in the viability of an independent left. This trend runs directly against the grain of regroupment. Its not that this trend is new, immutable or irreversible. But its continuance has unquestionably made regroupment seem more abstract even to some who already favor the idea.

So, the movements haven't grown as we expected and the left, rather than overcoming its fragmentation, has continued to disintegrate. Consequently the broad process of regroupment involving public forums and literary debate and joint work which we had projected has not yet taken place. *The left is increasingly less of an organizational and ideological left and more of a milieu, a network, and an attitude.* As noted in the past, this disintegration is, in one sense, a necessary condition for regroupment in so far as it breaks down loyalty to old ideas and organizations. But it also presents us with political and practical difficulties, particularly as other groups turn inward or are unable to put much energy into regroupment activities. With the lack of mass movements the left has not developed as we had hoped, and so our tactics must be altered.

#### Evaluation of Regroupment Itself

The main point to be made is that regroupment is not a simple and straightforward process. It is harder to deal with a milieu than it is to deal with organizations. The national organizations are weak and getting weaker. Other groups do not have the personnel or resources to give to regroupment. They do not have the political cohesion, respectable and loyal membership which make possible discussions of and commitment to organized public discussion and joint work. The tendency toward disintegration is accompanied by a tendency toward conservatism.

Another problem in our initial regroupment perspective — one which is further highlighted by the absence of mass movements was to underweight the importance of *politics* to the regroupment process. Whether we like it or not, there is no way around the necessity of patient political argument and struggle around certain key issues.

There is, for example, a larger portion of the left that maintains illusions about the Soviet Union of some sort or another. Most naturally, this is strongest among people doing 3rd world liberation support work. Or, take the question of organization itself: some will argue for party-type discipline, while others in the regroupment milieu regard any form of organizational restriction as the root of all evil.

In most political debates, two points will be at issue: (a) to clarify what *our* positions are, many of which are

misunderstood, and (b) to establish what are the political parameters ("lines of demarcation," in M-L terminology) for a broader revolutionary socialist organization.

Understanding that political debate is a key part of the regroupment process is part and parcel of understanding that the process itself is a protracted and sometimes tedious one.

In spite of these difficulties, there have been some successes in the regroupment process. Some areas of success include:

1) We have spread the knowledge of our existence as a political tendency and of our publication. Simply getting out and meeting the left in a number of "new" places, as well as expanding our contact with the left in places where we have members, has been healthy and important. It has expanded our potential to be a political and intellectual force on the left, regardless of the ultimate fate of regroupment.

2) Perhaps the most important gain is the growth of our reputation on the left. We are very well regarded for taking the initiative on regroupment. People see this as a non-sectarian, positive initiative even when they are not certain the goal of regroupment is possible, at least in the near future. The vision of a broad united revolutionary left is an attractive and powerful one, even when it seems remote in practical terms. That we are the ones who have taken the lead has accrued to our prestige. Furthermore, it has increased people's openness to and respect for our work in other areas — labor, labor paper, etc.

3) We continue to work with a growing variety of left groups and individuals in the unions, around the labor paper, in the anti-war movements, and elsewhere. In particular, we have expanded contact and work with ex-Maoist groups who share a good deal of our labor practice.

4) We have recently been able to help pull together a joint anti-war fraction in New York that involves people from our tradition (IS, WP, SSFN) and the RWH. This is an opportunity for joint work and political discussion. We also work in New York in the Solidarity Committee with a number of people from our tradition and the Maoist tradition and independents.

5) In Pittsburgh we have helped to pull together a couple dozen of political activists to discuss issues of importance to the left. This group is socialist, has some of the character of a local collective, and includes some of the area's leading labor activists.

6) In Iowa City, at the University of Iowa, we helped our x-members and some RWH and x-RCP people to bring together with other local socialists and movement activists to form the Independent Socialist Group/Reds which sees itself carrying on political discussion in order to intervene in political action. In the Bay Area the socialist study group continues to function.

7) We have established amicable relations with other independent political groups (Independent Socialist Study Group in Bloomington; Socialist-Feminists of Charlottesville, Virginia; North Star Socialist Collective, Minneapolis-St. Paul) who are involved in either political discussion or literary debate with us.

8) We have moved toward political discussion with some of the groups we have worked with. While this is just beginning, it represents a step beyond the early "hail fellow well met" stage of the regroupment process.

Nevertheless, none of the other national groups has yet

put much energy into this project. Either they have politically rejected it (SSFN), doubt an organizational conclusion (PUL), or are too weak to do very much (RWH & CPML). The crisis that faces all of these groups makes it difficult for them to bank on a process that does not guarantee their immediate survival. As a result, regroupment as a national campaign has been carried by us, as a public campaign it remains largely local and barely visible.

#### Where Do We Go From Here

At this point it seems necessary to restate what we said at our 1982 Convention. Regroupment is a protracted process. It does not have a built in time-table, nor will it simply conform to ours. The slowness with which new movements are taking shape has minimized the momentum of the left and hence of regroupment as a national public process. But regroupment is a strategy toward socialist organization which cannot simply be adopted and discarded according to the circumstances of the moment. We have rejected simple recruitment to the IS as a sufficient strategy for building a large socialist organization — though some recruitment is a necessary condition for our health and ability to carry out any strategy at all. And it seems apparent to most of us that the prospects of "entry" on any basis into any of the larger left organizations is more baseless than ever — since those organizations suffer from much of the same malaise as the rest of the left. This means that some version of regroupment represents the only viable way forward.

We must also remind ourselves that movements often take shape slowly and that radicalization within such movements does not occur overnight. An article on the U.S. labor movement in the recent issue of *New Left Review* noted that "the US labor movement is still in a virtually molecular stage of reorganization." This is true of other social and political movements as well. *To be in a position to take advantage of an upswing in any progressive movements requires that we have a general, non-sectarian perspective for socialist organization (regroupment), that our organization be in decent shape as an independent political pole of attraction, and that we be well positioned on the left to carry out our perspective.* Our work on regroupment has brought us some small gains in these areas and we should build on those gains.

1) We need to sharpen our political ideas and to bring more politics into the process. This means continuing to make *Changes* a forum of political debate on the revolutionary left and to spread its circulation. It also means moving toward more formal political talks with other organizations, national and local. These should not be "merger" talks, of course, but discussions on those political topics most relevant for developing movements and for future socialist organization, e.g., nature of the Soviet Union, approaches to disarmament, independent political action, nature of socialism, nature of women's oppression, national minorities, etc. We have already proposed having fairly regular talks with some other groups.

2) We should increase our emphasis on local collectives. This involves being more aggressive in discovering new ones and in developing our ties with those we have already met. Further, we should actively help these groups in their political educational work. As small isolated groups, they seldom have the resources to conduct the kind of broad political education needed to train

a new generation of socialists.

In particular, the IS should organize a "summer school" on the crisis of capitalism and socialist politics directed primarily towards independent socialists and these collectives. Some have already expressed interest in such an event. We should see this as part of a long term effort to become a political pole for such groups. It will also strengthen the forces in favor of regroupment in the short run. In some cases, as in Iowa City, and Pittsburgh, we can actually help form a local group where none exists.

3) While the national "road show" we envisioned as part of the second, public, stage of the regroupment process will be limited to a few cities, local public events of a more modest nature are possible in a number of additional places. The IS regroupment traveler should help get these meetings off the ground. Naturally, members in other areas should be active, but many of these public events will take place far from our branches or members. We should be flexible about the topics we propose and realize that we cannot force topics or formats on cities with very different left terrains.

4) To become more of a pole on the left, we need to go public. Those of our members who write should be encouraged to write for broad left publications, in addition to our own. Some have already done this and there is no question that it enhances the prestige of the group. The IS contains a considerable pool of talent and knowledge. Not only should this be reflected more often in *Changes*, but it should appear in publications like *ITT*, the *Progressive*, the *Nation*, *Working Papers*, *URPE*, and others. We have members who are adept not only at labor questions but at socialist theory as well. In a similar vein, IS members should seek out opportunities to speak to broad left events or even colleges, labor schools, etc. The IS traveler has found it relatively easy to get speaking engagements in a number of places.

5) In some places the possibilities of joint socialist work are severely limited. Even where such work is not possible we should continue to encourage and help organize joint left work around other projects, such as those often associated with the labor paper. We have discovered that this can often lay the basis for future joint work explicitly directed at regroupment.

While we understand the two kinds of work are not identical, nor should they be organizationally confused, joint work by leftists (often in cooperation with non-leftists) can contribute to the desire for more political forms of organization on a broader basis than in the '70s.

6) We should continue to employ a full time traveler and a part-time administrator to expand and deepen our part of the regroupment campaign. Without a serious input of this sort we would not have made the gains we have, nor could we put ourselves in a position to take advantage of future developments. Even though regroupment seems distant, the advantages of having a traveler in the field are enormous in terms of our contact with events as well as with the left.

So far, the progress of the regroupment project has been extensive rather than intensive in nature. It has not readily moved to a higher public phase, nor beyond the local level, attracted independent initiatives from other groups or individuals. There has been progress in a number of local areas where non-ISers have played a

responsible role. The *idea* is a popular one, but one that seems remote to most people. The distance of the goal makes the steps to be taken hard to clarify and the near term rewards hard to define. We have no real choice but to accept the largely local nature of the process until enough weight and momentum have been accrued to make it a truly national campaign for anyone but us. The steps outlined above will help build that momentum and position us within future developments.

Finally, we cannot overlook the fact that this campaign and idea have been beneficial to the IS. It has improved the functioning of some of our branches and many of our members. It has increased our presence and prestige on the left. It has begun to politically revitalize us as we come into contact, and sometimes conflict, with other political ideas and perspectives. We have recruited because of it.