

# Comments on “What to hold on to...” Draft

These are Scott’s comments on the first draft (Aug. 2000) of “What to hold on to, What to reconsider, What to discard”. These comments are longer than the draft itself! That is because I quote many passages, present several long alternative passages, and try to give my reasons for most proposed changes, even where these changes themselves are quite small.

## General Comments

Overall, I think this is a good first draft. But it clearly still needs some extensive work.

I like the title, but the title promises more than the paper delivers, i.e. positive suggestions about **What to hold on to, What to reconsider, What to discard**. This raises a doubt in my mind about the basic format of just putting forward questions without answers. It is fine to ask questions to get people thinking, but it is even better to at least give them some hints at that point as to what the probable best answers to those questions are. We are both trying to get people thinking, and also trying to guide them. The guidance doesn’t have to be blatant or overbearing, but I think it should be there whenever a question is raised (unless we really don’t know the basic answer to the question ourselves, or have some serious doubts or disagreements about it).

To illustrate the approach I have in mind, consider these two hypothetical alternatives (which are not drawn from the paper):

- A) Do we really need a revolution in this country, or will a long series of small reforms bring about a humane society? [With no hint of an answer to this question.]
- B) Do we really need a revolution in this country, or will a long series of small reforms bring about a humane society? Almost two centuries of failed efforts at fundamental reforms here, as well as world history in general, seem to show that the reformist path is hopeless.

Alternative B) not only raises a question, but suggests the correct answer. True, it could be stated more strongly, as by adding at the end: Revolution is in fact necessary! But the method of this second approach is to try to lead people to think, help guide them to the correct solution, but to avoid blatantly pushing it into their face.

When we get to the explicit questions (and scenarios) raised in the paper I’ll try to give some possible “hints” or suggestions of the correct answer of the sort that I think should be inserted.

## The Introduction (p. 1, lines 2-23)

I think the introduction is very good. The only slight change I might make is on line 21 with the sentence **We don’t promise to come up with all the answers**. This still makes it sound a little bit like we want other people’s help in formulating and considering some basic questions, but that it will be our small group’s responsibility (in the main) to come up with the answers, or at least most of them. Possibly this sentence could be rewritten something along the lines of: **We don’t promise to come up with all the answers to these questions all by ourselves!** Or maybe: **We don’t promise to come up with all the answers—certainly not entirely by ourselves!** However, even then, and given the actual questions that are being raised—most of which *we actually do believe we have the basic answers to!*—this all seems quite disingenuous. So I think the sentence **We don’t promise to come up with all the answers** should simply be removed.

Also, maybe we should have some sort of break after the introduction (i.e. after line 23), such as three centered asterisks on a separate line. Or perhaps there could be a sub-head here, such as:  
**Scenarios for Revolution**

## **The Implied “Final Goal” of Socialism**

The draft says: **By “revolution,” we mean a conscious act that puts an end to capitalism, imperialism and national oppression, and then establishes a socialist society.** (p. 1, lines 25-26) This is not scientifically correct. The word ‘revolution’ (among Marxists) is commonly used to mean 1) the actual seizing of power by the revolutionary class, and, more fundamentally, 2) the overthrow of one social system and its replacement by another (more progressive) one. In the first sense, a revolution is something that happens on a particular day, or at least over a relatively short period. In the second sense, the revolution is the whole period of transition from one social system to another. The sentence here seems to be talking about both senses of the word ‘revolution’ simultaneously.

“Putting an end to capitalism” is, however, clearly a much bigger thing than simply initially seizing power from the capitalists. We do not “put an end to capitalism” and *then* “establish socialism”, as the sentence says; instead, the whole socialist transition period is part of the revolutionary *means* of putting an end to capitalism. The way it is put in this sentence, it sounds like the final goal of the revolution is the establishment of a socialist system. In other words, this is similar to the use of the word “socialism” that is popular among revisionists and social democrats and many others whose notions of revolution are rudimentary at best.

The highlighted sentence would be (more or less) scientifically correct if the word ‘socialism’ were changed to ‘communism’. However, I know that people do not want to do that here, because it would mean directly confronting the prejudices of many young radicals whose notion of “communism” is something like the revisionist Soviet Union. Since disabusing them of all that garbage cannot be done quickly and in a few sentences, it seems we do have to avoid using the word ‘communism’ here.

One possible alternative phrasing therefore might be: **By “revolution,” we mean more than just the initial seizure of power by the people from the ruling capitalist class. We also mean the further series of conscious acts by the revolutionary people over a fairly long transitional period (socialism) which puts a complete end to the capitalist system and all its vestiges, to imperialism, and to all national oppression, and establishes a classless society without any exploitation or oppression.** (The words ‘fairly long’ might possibly be removed from the foregoing if people think that might be something that will turn off too many people—who might view “fairly long” as in practice a code for “permanent”.)

I know we talked briefly at our recent get-togethers about this issue of how the word ‘socialism’ is to be used, and most people didn’t seem to think it is such an important matter as I do. But I really believe we should avoid phrasing things in ways that we ourselves know to be wrong, even if that is what some people are use to hearing and want to hear. Certainly we must always consider our audience for everything we have to say, and take their preconceptions into account. But we should also always try to put things truthfully and correctly and not pander to prevalent misconceptions.

## The Discussion of Revolutionary Scenarios

The last sentence on p. 1 has a few problems: **In each of these scenarios, a revolutionary situation could arise from a number of conditions: economic collapse; revolutions in large and/or strategically important areas of the world; war between the U.S. and competing imperialist powers; major ecological catastrophe; or a combination of them.** First of all, the word ‘collapse’ is a bit loaded. Perhaps **depression or severe economic crisis** might be better than “economic collapse”. Second, the sentence mentions interimperialist war but not Vietnam-type wars—which also might help generate a revolutionary situation. My biggest question about the sentence, however, is that the phrase **In each of these scenarios, a revolutionary situation could arise...** which seems to suggest that *all* the scenarios presented are really plausible, and that every one of them might actually lead to a revolution. So I would omit the introductory clause and rewrite the sentence like this: **A revolutionary situation could arise from a number of conditions, such as: depression or severe economic crisis; revolutions in large and/or strategically important areas of the world; war between the U.S. and another competing imperialist power; major colonial wars like the Vietnam War where the U.S. gets bogged down and tries to ignore mass outrage at home; major ecological catastrophe; or a combination of these.**

I think that the order of the scenarios should be changed, starting with the feeling of hopelessness that many have, then going to the scenario with the least likelihood of success, and proceeding to that with the most likelihood—mass insurrection followed by civil war. It is nice to move in more hopeful directions. (For now, though I’ll refer to them in the order they are in the draft.)

Scenario #1 (p. 2, lines 2-6): The first sentence makes it sound like a 2-stage insurrection is envisaged—“informal” armed uprisings in a few cities, followed by a coordinated insurrection in many cities. This seems to be only one path of many that insurrection might take. (The Bolshevik revolution didn’t have a 2-stage insurrection, for example.)

I think it would be a good idea to add a sentence (after line 6) like: **There are many variations on how such an insurrection might develop, but it seems like one form or another of mass insurrection is the most likely revolutionary scenario in an advanced capitalist country like the U.S.**

Scenario #2 (p. 2, lines 7-13): I think the way this is stated is *much* too positive about the possibilities for this scenario working out successfully. In particular I think the phrase (**and unlike Chile**) is really wrong. Chile *should* be mentioned, but as a way of suggesting that this is *not* likely to be a successful path to revolution. Possible rewrite: **Scenario #2: Revolutionary and pro-democracy forces successfully struggle for reforms with a major focus in the electoral arena. As this struggle to extend democracy isolates the most reactionary sectors of the bourgeoisie, the die-hard rightists launch a military coup d’etat (similar to Chile in 1973). Although the revolutionary forces might try to be prepared to defeat the rightists, the military and the police, in order to safeguard and extend the democratic gains of the people, the experience of Chile and other countries which have tried to follow this path shows the great dangers of this approach.**

Scenario #3 (p. 2, lines 14-20): My big question here is what **launch serious insurrectionary movements** is supposed to mean. But leaving that aside, I really think that something like the following needs to be tacked on to the end of this scenario: **The question to ponder, however, is if separate sub-sections of the people should try to launch separate insurrections, or if**

**revolutionaries wouldn't be far more likely to succeed if they unite and launch a coordinated insurrection by all nationalities simultaneously.**

Scenario #4 (p. 2, lines 21-27): This scenario of urban guerilla warfare is also too positive. Perhaps it could have another sentence appended: **Unfortunately, so far all attempts at urban guerilla warfare everywhere in the world have been defeated rather easily by the capitalists.**

Scenario #5 (p. 2, lines 28-34): Again, this pessimistic scenario is presented too "positively". Perhaps we could append something like: **It is hard to imagine the movement building up much mass enthusiasm or accomplishing much of anything under this pessimistic scenario of hopelessness.**

The general discussion of all the scenarios (the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 paragraphs on p. 3) is excellent, as is the next paragraph leading into the questions of organization.

### **Question 1: Should an organization be secret or open?**

Line 27 (on p. 3) pretty much repeats line 26. Following the course I suggested in my general comments above, I think this section should read something like this:

#### **1. To what extent does a revolutionary organization need to be secret or open?**

**Under present conditions, how does an organization prepare for the time when the government makes political opposition illegal? How does an organization protect itself from attack, disruption, surveillance and infiltration by the government? Traditionally, revolutionaries have seen the need for both open and secret work, to engage in legal work where possible, but to be prepared for illegal work when and where it becomes necessary. Even distributing leaflets and newspapers can become illegal. Most revolutionaries have therefore come to the conclusion that the membership and precise leadership structure of their core organization(s) must be kept as secret from the government as is possible. Under some conditions it is impossible to work at all except by means of secret organizational relationships. This is why Lenin said that the initial reason for forming a revolutionary party in Russia was just so revolutionaries could know who else to trust.**

### **Question 2: Should it have a mass or cadre character?**

What's there so far is good, but I'd suggest at least appending something like: **To what extent do the greater responsibilities and dangers for revolutionaries in the future, as a revolutionary situation begins to develop, mean that we should be more serious organizationally even today?**

### **Question 3: How should a group organize itself and function so that it stays close to the masses and is able to lead them forward toward revolution?**

This is a clear case where we have an obligation to at least hint at some answers, since I think a lot of revolutionary-minded people don't have much of a clue here. We've got to at least

mention some of the elements of having a mass perspective and using the mass line. After the question as it now exists in the draft, I'd suggest appending something like: **It seems, first of all, that since it is the masses of the people who must make a revolution, revolutionary groups must be organized and function so that their members are immersed in the masses and their actual struggles. At the same time, revolutionaries must not just follow the existing level of consciousness among the masses, which is normally only a reformist perspective, but must "bring the light of revolution" to them, to help them understand that revolution is necessary, and how their own struggles can help lead in that direction. Much of the technique for learning from the masses themselves *how to lead the masses in a revolutionary direction* was developed by Mao in China, and is called "the mass line". This is something that revolutionaries everywhere need to study and master.**

#### **Questions 4 & 5: Should it be run according to democratic-centralist principles?**

On p. 4, line 9 the acronym **ICM** is used. Although that might be intelligible to many people, I think it is bound to be mysterious to many others. Such uncommon acronyms should only be used if they were explained earlier. Furthermore, the sentence here, is, alas, not actually true: **In the history of the ICM, democratic centralism has been based on the Marxist theory of knowledge...** Actually, more often than not, *what has been called* democratic centralism has been *justified* (in part) by appealing to the Marxist theory of knowledge, while the actual practice of this "democratic centralism" has only partially put the Marxist theory of knowledge into practice, in a few parties, and for a certain time.

The sentence (on p. 4, lines 19-20), **Why have nearly all "democratic centralist" organizations and parties ended up becoming mainly or exclusively centralist?** is, however, much too negatively put. This is a good example of raising a question which might tend to lead many or most people in the *wrong* direction unless some positive guidance is also given. The sentence seems to suggest that there is something *inherently deficient* in the whole idea of democratic centralism—which is not at all the case.

The definition of factions **...factions (organized dissenting groups that involve different party units)...** [p. 4, line 22] is also overly contentious in a negative way. Factions are not necessarily "organized"; sometimes they are only people in a room who happen to strongly agree with a certain position. And one can, for example, favor allowing informal factions, but oppose factions that develop too much organization, their own formal leadership, separate and higher discipline, etc., and which become in reality separate parties within the overall "party". Furthermore, factions are not necessarily "dissenting groups"; the official or dominant group may also constitute a faction.

It is hard for me to see how all the many things relating to democratic centralism, leaders, factions, etc., can be gone into as briefly as with the other questions being raised. The draft itself divided the issue into two parts (questions 4 & 5), but possibly a third question about factions should be split off, and a fourth about issues of democracy.

And lastly, I think it is extremely important to bring up the concept of *organizational discipline* here explicitly (and not just assume it under the term 'centralism'), since the failure of many young revolutionaries to recognize the importance of discipline is one their greatest shortcomings.

Here is my attempt to rewrite questions 4 & 5.

4. Should a revolutionary organization be run according to democratic-centralist principles?

A serious revolutionary organization needs to act in a pretty-much unified way, certainly when it comes to momentous matters like helping the masses prepare for and launch a nation-wide insurrection. This seems to argue for a high degree of organization and group discipline, and for the right and obligation of higher bodies to issue instructions and guidelines to lower bodies. At the same time we want an organization of thinking revolutionaries, an organization in which not just a few leaders do all the thinking and discussing, but which involves every member in the process of formulating the group's positions and decisions about what to do. Moreover, we need an organization that really transmits the ideas of its members up to the leadership, and even more importantly, that really gathers and transmits the ideas of the masses up to them as well.

In short, it seems we really do need an organizational structure which is centralized (for unified action), but also truly democratic (unlike the practice of many older groups which imagine that they have implemented democratic centralism), and which really does implement the Marxist theory of knowledge. (Note: The idea here is that there must be some organizational means of gathering and transmitting all the good ideas of the members and the masses about how to advance the struggle; a means of educating the leaders themselves with this new knowledge; a means for the organization and especially its leadership bodies to concentrate this knowledge, in light of the actual objective situation and in light of extensive knowledge of similar situations throughout history and around the world; and at the same time there must be a means of returning this summed-up knowledge to the members and the masses in the form of well-thought-out policies and coordinated political action. This is the goal and role of the mass line and genuine democratic centralism *within* a revolutionary organization.)

The main weakness of many organizations which incorrectly *thought* they were employing democratic centralism in the past is that it often turned out to be all centralism and little or no democracy. This has meant (among other negative things) that new ideas were stifled—if they arose or were gathered at all—and that such organizations lost touch with the masses and any chance of leading them in revolution. This seems to suggest that genuine democracy needs to be much more strongly stressed and truly implemented than ever before, in any new revolutionary organization—without, however, throwing out the need for solid organization, centralism, and discipline.

4B. [Renumber as 5.] But what principles of democracy, exactly, are most important to stress in a revolutionary organization?

It seems that at a minimum: 1) each unit should choose its leader or leaders, and delegates to higher bodies, through genuinely democratic elections; 2) the decisions of all units should be arrived at through majority vote after full democratic discussion; 3) all members should have the right to hold their own opinions on issues and argue for them at the appropriate times, as long as they carry out and publicly defend group decisions.

Other democratic possibilities include: 1) the right of recall, at any time, of any elected leader or delegate; and 2) elections by secret ballot, at least if any member of the unit so requests.

Perhaps the general principle should be that all aspects of democracy should be adopted which do not destroy the unity of will and effectiveness of the organization as a whole. What do you think?

4C. [Renumber as 6.] How does an organization prevent its leaders from being corrupted—politically, morally or financially—by being in a position of power over others? How does it keep leaders accountable to the membership (other than just through elections and recalls)? How does the organization promote the development of collective leadership and new leaders in an ongoing way?

Some possibilities here include: 1) the strict adherence to democratic standards; 2) building an organizational culture opposed to “cults of the individual” and the glorification of individual leaders; 3) term limits; 4) leadership rotation; and/or 5) requiring periodic “sabbaticals” where the top leaders, especially, are required to go down into the lower ranks for substantial periods (as was done in China during the Cultural Revolution).

4D. [Renumber as 7.] But should the individual rights of members, such as the right to reserve your own private opinion and argue for it in the appropriate circumstances, extend to sub-groups (“factions”) within the organization?

Opinions differ on this, but it seems that if democracy is truly to be stressed, the answer would have to be yes—again, as long as these factions merely reserve their disagreements when they are in the minority, and always carry out and publicly defend the decisions of the majority and the whole organization.

#### Question 6: Multiple revolutionary organizations based on nationality.

There needs to be a question mark added at the end of the first question (p. 5, line 8).

The 2<sup>nd</sup> question (lines 9-10), **Is there a need for mass organizations to build struggle among these oppressed nationalities?** is a little unclear. Under one interpretation the answer is obvious to everyone—*of course* there should be mass organizations building struggle among oppressed nationalities. The question, though, is about the character and makeup of these mass organizations; should they be restricted to people of the given nationality? Apparently what was intended would be clearer if the word ‘separate’ were inserted, as in: **Is there a need for separate mass organizations to build struggle among these oppressed nationalities?**

I would rewrite lines 9-12, as follows:

**Is there a need for separate mass organizations to build struggle among these oppressed nationalities? How should the core revolutionary organization(s) give leadership to mass organizations? What is the relationship between multinational revolutionary organizations and nationality-based mass organizations? It seems like it will be necessary to form a high degree of unity in the revolutionary movement if we are**

to actually make a revolution, and therefore we need to develop methods of working together in a unified fashion in all our mass work.

**Question 7: In a multinational revolutionary organization, what should be the composition by nationality and gender of the organization, and of its leadership bodies?**

Although the wording of this question and also the questions on lines 15-21 is fairly good, here again I think it would be best if there were a little positive guidance included as well. However, I can't think of any specific suggestions here yet.

Logically, what is now question 7 should come after question 8. But perhaps it is correct to put it first for psychological reasons (i.e., to cushion the reception to my rephrasing of question 8!)

**Question 8: Is the eventual development of one leading multinational revolutionary organization or party a requirement for a successful socialist revolution in the U.S.?**

I know our group itself seems to have a disagreement over this question, though for me the answer is obviously yes. In fact, I think it is too much of a concession to nationalism to even put the question that way, at least if no positive guidance follows it. I think the business about forming military alliances should simply be dropped; if sufficient *political* unity develops, that becomes a moot issue. I would rewrite this section along these lines:

**8. How can our movement develop a central multinational revolutionary organization or party, which seems to be necessary to provide the primary and overall leadership for a revolution in a multinational country?**

**In the meanwhile, until such a party is built, how can our existing revolutionary organizations whether multinational or not—and new ones that are constantly being formed—work together in a more unified and comradely fashion? How can we begin to build right now the greater unity that we will definitely need in the future?**

**Socialist Society (p. 6 of the draft)**

I agree that some of the material on this page should be raised in this document, including the excellent point made in lines 2-4, that **the character of revolutionary organizations that we build now greatly influences what kind of society we build after the revolutionary seizure of power**. However, some of these questions really do require quite a bit of discussion if they are going to be raised this way, and I wonder if we really want to expand the paper that much.

For example, the question raised on lines 12-13, **Should the party or parties that led the revolution have an institutionalized hold (or monopoly) on political power?** Simply raising the question that way, without discussing it, is in fact a way of suggesting that such a party or parties *should not* have such a monopoly. I.e., I think that that is the attitude that most people will have if they don't think the question through carefully. But helping people to actually think the matter through carefully would take quite a bit of space, and have to get into a number of



involved sub-issues, such as precisely *how* a revolutionary party should go about leading the masses.

Consequently, I don't think we should formally raise the four additional questions on page 6. Instead, I propose the following summary paragraphs (to appear after a break such as the draft already has on p. 6, line 1):

**The character of the revolutionary organizations that we build now greatly influences the kind of society that we will be able to build after the revolutionary seizure of power. If our revolutionary organizations are not genuinely democratic, quite likely neither will our revolutionary society turn out to be democratic. If genuine respect for all nationalities and the equal participation of women and men cannot be created in our revolutionary organizations now, then very likely we will not be able to create such equality and respect in our revolutionary society either. If our form of revolutionary organization does not become essentially unified at least in the main, quite likely neither will our revolutionary society be unified—in the unlikely event we can even get that far.**

Many of the questions which will come to be of the first importance in socialist society actually have the roots of their solution in how we build and develop our revolutionary movement today. For example, in socialist society we will inevitably be faced with “capitalist roaders” (new bourgeois elements) arising in the leading party or parties and in the government. They will have to be suppressed by the people if the revolution is not to be short-circuited as happened in the Soviet Union and China. But by setting up genuinely democratic revolutionary organizations now, which allow the members and the masses to keep a close eye on their leadership and how they function, and which keep bringing new people from below into leadership while giving the old leaders “a rest” from time to time, we will have already firmly established many of the elements necessary for dealing with this problem later.

Similarly, by successfully building democratic-centralist forms of revolutionary organization now, and ones which are not just “democratic” in name but also in reality, we will have gone a long way toward institutionalizing this same relationship between the masses and their leadership in a future revolutionary society. This will make it much easier for such a society to both *begin* with the people in actual control, and to *remain* that way. And it will allow the people the kind of collective unity of action that will be necessary to further change society through a series of significant steps, until all the remaining vestiges of the present horrible system have been completely eliminated.

### **A Contact Address is Needed at the End**

We are asking for feedback and ideas from others, so at the end of the paper there should be at least one address where we can be contacted. Perhaps a post office box. Probably the paper should also have a date on it somewhere.

### **Misc. Typos and Such**

On p. 1, line 3, apostrophes are included in the phrase **the 1960's, 70's, 80's and 90's**, whereas on line 24 no apostrophe is included in **the 1960s**. We should be consistent on this, and I think the preferred standard is to omit the apostrophes.