

Letter to the ISO Membership - On #MeToo and the damaging impacts of our past practices and internal political culture

A statement of the International Socialist Organization and a message from “Socialist Worker”

Tuesday 19 March 2019, by [ISO \(USA\)](#), [Socialist Worker \(USA\)](#) (Date first published: 19 March 2019).

The International Socialist Organization’s Steering Committee sent this letter to members about a deep crisis in the ISO. We are sharing it publicly here on *Socialist Worker*. We have edited it slightly to be published on a public website and have added updated information.

March 15, 2019

THREE WEEKS ago, the ISO held its most important convention, which was also its most painful. Much of the convention was devoted to reckoning with the damaging impacts of our past practices and internal political culture. As branches have reported back and opened up these discussions, more examples of a damaging political culture have come to light. This brief letter from the new Steering Committee (SC) was written to update comrades on those incidents and on timelines with respect to mandates voted on by Convention delegates, while offering some thoughts on how to proceed.

As this letter was being drafted, the SC (as well as several members of the National Committee (NC) and several socialist feminist allies) received a document from a former member (FM from here forward) on March 11, detailing the ways in which the 2013 SC had badly mishandled an allegation of rape in 2013. Moreover, the document explained that the respondent in the allegation had recently been elected to our SC at this year’s convention. FM was on the National Disciplinary Committee (NDC) that originally heard the case. FM’s account has been corroborated by other members of the NDC at that time who remain active members of the organization. We are grateful to FM for having taken the time to write this and reach out to us. FM also copied on the e-mail allies outside of the ISO whom we have worked in socialist-feminist and queer activism.

The SC held an emergency meeting on Tuesday night, and then a joint meeting on Thursday night with the NC and other members, including members of the National Branch Council ad hoc organizing committee, the survivors’ caucus and the #MeToo commission, to begin a discussion of the implications of this document and what next steps need to be taken. Here are some of the immediate steps we have taken:

- We immediately responded to FM and to the allies who were copied on the e-mail to thank FM for sending it, informing them that we would be sending it out and discussing as a leadership, and stating that we take this very seriously.
- On Tuesday, after SC members asked that the respondent identify himself and resign, he did, voluntarily resigned from the SC and said he would take a leave of absence. The SC voted to suspend him and stipulate that a decision would be made on his membership status later.

- On Thursday, the joint meeting of the NC, SC and other members agreed unanimously to expel the respondent according to the original decision of the NDC. In addition, the meeting voted to suspend from membership three members of the 2013 SC directly involved in the outcome of the case, while a complete investigation of what happened in 2013 takes place. The meeting also voted to suspend from a position on any leadership body any member of the 2013 SC, along with a recently elected NC member who had played a role in undermining the work of the NDC, for the duration of the investigation.
- We now need to empower a body independent of the current SC that can investigate the conduct of the 2013 SC and other participants in that 2013 process. Whether that should be the recently formed #MeToo commission, the NDC or some other body still needs to be determined, but will be soon.
- Another joint meeting of the same participants this weekend will continue the discussion and develop a process for a further public statement. It will also be discussing how to create spaces for membership-wide discussion. All members are invited to a meeting via conference call that is being set up for Monday.
- A member from Portland is organizing a support call for survivors or others triggered by this document. A survivors' caucus is being formed and resources for survivors are being collected.

The document from FM is very clear, and rather than editorializing, we will leave comrades to assess it for themselves. We will be writing much more and providing space for analysis and discussion of what took place, lessons learned from it and what needs to change in the coming weeks. We believe it speaks both to failures of our political culture that we have identified as well as failures to adequately address the needs of survivors, a lack of understanding of the dynamics of rape and sexual assault, and the failure to create a process that could prioritize doing our best to determine the truth of what happened over bureaucratic proceduralism. This is not separate from the issues we have been reckoning with and the culture we are fighting to transform — though this experience is a particularly acute and devastating manifestation of this culture. There is no way to move forward from this without the utmost honesty and critical assessment.

Offenses like the failure of the disciplinary process were the worst products of culture presided over by a leadership that exerted control and had far too little accountability. But there are many other examples. Comrades from oppressed backgrounds were disproportionately impacted by these methods and this culture. Their commitment to the organization and to revolutionary socialism was questioned under the guise of a broad "identity politics" umbrella and comrades' right to caucus was squashed in practice. Comrades with decades of trade union experience were held in suspicion for fear that they might stray too far from a course set out by the SC. Comrades who raised real questions about the ISO's role in the new socialist movement were accused of violating principles. And the ISO's leadership treated genuine concern from members about resources and personnel decisions as illegitimate expressions of "anti-leadership" sentiment.

At convention, we began the process of addressing these things, and doing so with an eye to the future of the ISO and the socialist left. While the fight for socialism from below remains the guide for our work, we are aware of the need to take pause and look squarely at what is coming to light right now. Our first priority is accountability — to members and non-members harmed by these practices. We must also learn from these grave errors and offenses, and work to repair damage done to people, insofar as we can. This is our obligation to our membership, past and present, and to the whole left.

In the lead-up to Convention and since, we have begun to reflect on how a project whose intention is to fight with the oppressed for socialism from below could go so horribly wrong. By way of

understanding that, we recognize that we are coming out of a several decades-long period of a Left shrinking and in retreat, and that period shaped the ISO's practices, both external and internal. We steeled ourselves to survive amid an otherwise languishing Left.

Without a political assessment and engagement with the world around us, the important internal issues that need time to be heard out, developed, and transformed will narrow to interpersonal dynamics. While important, if our assessment stays there, it is unlikely to provide a sufficient explanation and way forward.

This letter cannot be a substitute for the Convention-mandated structural changes, debates, and apologies that are in process, so we will restrict ourselves here to listing some of the actions the SC will be taking in the coming weeks in order to assure comrades that decisions made at Convention are binding. Among these:

1. Establishing both an internal #MeToo commission and starting to plan for organizing an activist #MeToo conference" on tasks the SC and other bodies are addressing in the coming weeks.
2. Public perspectives laying out the ISO's goals and areas of work for all to see (this was mandated to appear by the end of March)
3. Developing an affirmative action policy (we are forming a subcommittee to study hiring, resources, and more)
4. Public apology from the outgoing and incoming SC to comrades of color (Convention mandated 90 days, but we hope to have this published by the end of March)
5. Elections Committee to support independent candidates and ballot initiatives, and study how the ISO can relate to socialist campaigns run on Democratic ballot lines. (The SC will appoint this in the next week or two.)
6. Support preparation for a Special ISO Convention in September focused on electoral strategy and anti-oppression struggles.

The 2019 Convention radically restructured the ISO's leadership, including a redesigned National Committee, an empowered National Branch Council, and a Steering Committee composed of two-thirds new members, including 50 percent comrades of color. For our part, the SC is committed to helping support comrades by listening, facilitating discussion, and making amends as we move through this necessary, yet difficult, process and toward a new direction for the ISO. As revolutionaries we know that change is never easy, it is always challenging, and successful outcomes cannot be guaranteed.

As we pass through this reckoning, some of us bear more responsibility for our mistakes than others. We all share the dual task of analyzing what we did right, and what we did wrong. Many of our faults were self-inflicted, but others arose from challenges that all left-wing forces must face. Unfortunately, questions of racism and sexual misconduct exist throughout our society and the left. As such, rather than trying to keep our debates quiet, we believe we must publicly discuss and assess our mistakes, and call on friends and allies to offer advice, counsel, and expertise. We also hope that by speaking and acting openly, the lessons we learn in righting our ship may be of some use to the new movement in avoiding some of our mistakes.

To comrades who have decided to leave the ISO, either due to the strain and stress of the past years, or owing to their assessment that their skills can be better put to use elsewhere in the new socialist movement, we pledge to find a path to working with you as revolutionaries in common struggles.

To comrades who are questioning whether the ISO can correct course and emerge as a more effective, diverse, and collaborative revolutionary force, we pledge honesty and hope our collective trust can be built.

To comrades who are staying to build the ISO and improve on the work — with all its problems — we have accomplished over the years, we ask you to be patient with comrades who have doubts, work consistently towards concrete improvements, and help build a new kind of confidence in our project.

We are heartened by the recent first calls of the trans caucus and people of color (POC) caucus. There are also comrades who are reflecting on their own actions and those of others in our organization, and trying to put our heads together to address the wrongs. These things are all necessary for what the present requires of us, let alone any future of this project.

We cannot separate our tasks of changing ourselves from our responsibility to change the world. But neither can we push the former aside in favor of the latter. This will be our challenge for the coming months (and years). We need critique, debate, and ideas for improvements as we move ahead together.

We invite your input, questions, and discussion.

- <http://socialistworker.org/2019/03/15/letter-to-the-iso-membership>
- *The original title of this contribution is “Letter to the ISO Membership”. ESSF redaction added “On #MeToo and the damaging impacts of our past practices and internal political culture” for the issue at stake to be visible.*

A MESSAGE TO OUR READERS

March 19, 2019

By devoting ourselves to reckoning with the crisis that has gripped our organization, we hope to serve both current and former members of the ISO and the wider socialist left.

THE INTERNATIONAL Socialist Organization (ISO), publisher of *Socialist Worker*, is in a deep crisis whose immediate cause is the exposure of a 2013 sexual assault case that was horribly mishandled by our national leadership at the time. Last Friday, *Socialist Worker* published a public version of the letter written by our recently elected Steering Committee to ISO members regarding the revelation and initial steps that had been taken in response [see above].

The news about the 2013 case came shortly after a momentous convention devoted to addressing the organization’s unaccountable leadership structures and a damaging internal culture that had a disproportionate impact on people of color and others with oppressed identities. The convention resulted in a thorough change in our national leadership and a commitment to chart a new direction so the ISO could be more engaged in struggle and with the new socialist movement.

In the convention’s aftermath, many ISO members felt a mixture of hope, pain and uncertainty. Those feelings have been replaced by ones of rage, despair and betrayal. Some have felt they can no

longer be a part of the ISO. Those who remain recognize how difficult it will be to reckon with this crisis and all the damage it has done.

Certainly, there is a shared understanding among all that the only future for the ISO begins with a frank and searching discussion. So regardless of what the future brings, the main goal of *Socialist Worker* in the coming weeks is to be of service to current and former ISO members and the wider left by providing a platform for socialists to grapple with the many issues that have led us to this point.

It's unclear at what pace these articles will appear. We plan to begin this process with contributions from current or recently resigned ISO members, and we won't rush those into publication. So as much as we want *SW* become a forum for continuing discussion and reflection, we can't yet say how regularly we will be running articles in the coming days.

We are of course aware that even as we experience this trauma, important events—from the horror of the Christchurch massacre to the hope of the student climate strike—continue to unfold in the wider world that we've all come together in a collective project to change for the better. Once we've begun publishing about our own crisis, we plan to start running reports and analysis from other struggles, although at what pace and quantity we can't yet say.

We hope our readers understand that as *Socialist Worker* brings an intense focus over the coming days and weeks to the situation inside the ISO, we are not ignoring the exciting new opportunities and challenges confronting the U.S. left, but understanding that at this moment the most important contribution we can make to that left is to begin and continue an honest and open reckoning with our failures.

For all of its flaws, the ISO has over the years recruited and trained many brilliant and talented people with a deep commitment to the politics of socialism from below, internationalism and the belief that we need a revolutionary transformation to create a world free of oppression and violence.

Some of those comrades left the organization or are leaving now, but many remain and are working with determination to organize a collective reckoning and, perhaps eventually, a rebirth. *Socialist Worker* aims to be a platform for their efforts.

Socialist Worker

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