Truth and Revolution:

Michael Staudenmaier
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As time passes, and events that one participated in decades ago have become the stuff of history, one often faces the reality that too many accounts by younger scholars bear scant resemblance to one’s memories. Too often scholars ignore the recollections of participants that do not buttress their own preconceived conclusions. I am pleased that Michael Staudenmaier’s *Truth and Revolution: A History of the Sojourner Truth Organization* (STO) breaks from that mold. I was active in Chicago Black and left politics during the 1960s. I knew or worked with several of the key figures discussed in this study, and met others of them during subsequent years. Staudenmaier’s account as far as possible gets it right.

Staudenmaier recounts how the STO attempted over a decade and a half to hold on to their principles while confronting an increasingly inhospitable environment. Staudenmaier makes a case without rancor, but with great care and sympathy, that their efforts to achieve any lasting change was a failure and that the organization’s demise was a tragedy, though largely, it is hard to see how the outcome could have been otherwise.

The political and economic trajectories taken by the United States and capitalism on a global scale during the past four decades have made a shambles of any simplistic teleology positing inevitable passage through stages of history. Who can say with any certainty how to characterize the current era or its place in some larger historical process?

The STO, like many of the most prominent left organizations, grew out of the specific circumstances of the 1960s. None survived as the country moved steadily to the right and the ruling class worked to smash, intimidate, or coopt such groups as the Black Panther Party, League of Revolutionary Black Workers, SDS, Revolutionary Action Movement, etc. They all share a story of internal debates—especially over issues of gender, family and sexuality, fragmentation, turnover and loss of membership, burnout, and eventual demise. The lesson of the STO may be
more in the depth of their commitment to understanding the world in all its complexities than in their relative successes or failures in changing it.

On a personal note, it is good that the lives and works of old friends and comrades not be lost or forgotten. I remember meeting Ken Lawrence (Berg at that time) and his future wife Pat at the sit-in demonstrations at 73rd and Lowe on Chicago’s south side in 1963. They both were in high school I believe and seemed so very young. I was surprised that they became active in Facing Reality. It was to their apartment that I brought C.L.R. James to meet with a group of young Black activists so that James could take the measure of their goals and beliefs. One of the achievements of the Black student movement at Northwestern University was to hire James as one of the first faculty in a budding Black Studies Department and we helped to fulfill all of his requests to meet with youth and activists in the Chicago area.

Macee Halk I knew through organizing efforts among the students and street gangs on the South and West sides. We both were members of the Revolutionary Action Movement. Like Malcolm X, Macee evolved beyond an earlier life that had resulted in his incarceration and transformed himself into one of the smartest most courageous persons that I have ever encountered. My memory of talks with Macee about his work with the STO confirm Staudenmaier’s account. In fact, I met Carole Travis when she made a trip to Amherst, Massachusetts to see Macee whom I had invited to participate in an anti-war, anti-imperialist conference. Noel Ignatiev I had known through various audio tapes he sent me from time to time. I respected him as a fellow admirer of the Marxism of C.L.R. James, and I later accepted his invitation to serve on the editorial board of Race Traitor. Staudenmaier’s portrayal of Noel again seems accurate and fair.

The STO has left behind important traces of their thoughts and practice. The special issue of Urgent Tasks on “C.L.R. James: His Life and Work” is still a useful antidote to the flood of new works that have tried to redefine James as a founder of “cultural studies,” “postcoloniality,” and the like. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey’s Race Traitor stands as an approach far beyond the platitudes of multicultural dialogue, etc. The STO’s emphasis on popular culture as sites of resistance was thoroughly Jamesian. After the publication of Beyond a Boundary, the left, as Staudenmaier relates, was free to break loose from the strictures of folk music and the elitism of Frankfurt School theoreticians, and to engage with the sights and sounds of the world they lived in.

Staudenmaier offers a valuable cautionary account of the STO’s difficult and complex attempts to struggle against male supremacy in both its institutional and interpersonal manifestations. It is a welcome relief
from the often over generalized and not very useful accounts in most histories of the left. The discussion on parenting and the role of children by members of the STO is insightful and unique. Many of the internal struggles are an indication of the strong influence on the U.S. left of Leninist forms of organization dictated by the conditions of Czarist Russia. The contrast with the very full, interesting, chaotic lives of Karl Marx’s family is telling. The letters of Marx’s daughters portray Marx as a loving and supportive father, and the Marx household as a place not without fun and laughter. The fight for socialism does not have to be boring.

Staudenmaier has done a great service in walking past the obvious big game targets on the left and has given us an extremely valuable history of how one can be of the left, yet not live in despair. There was much work to be done and many ways to do it. The value in this study is not to present formulas or to engage in nostalgia. It is to document the experiences of a group of people who, acting on a clearly defined set of ideas, engaged in a variety of forms of struggle that were in concert with their ultimate goal of the empowerment of working people and a transition to socialism. When, how, or even if this takes place, knowledge of past experiences can provide both insights and inspiration as well as caveats and warnings. Future generations, not us, will decide what use will be made of the history of the STO. Staudenmaier has done his part by preserving and analyzing that experience so that it will be there if wanted and needed. My experience in watching the impact of lectures by Noel Ignatiev and Selma James on youthful audiences, the popularity of Race Traitor, and the interest excitement generated by a seminar on James’ writings among students active in the Occupy movement indicates that the ideas and efforts of the STO still have resonance.

As capitalism (not neoliberalism, whatever that is) continues the relentless expansion across the globe that Marx outlined in the Communist Manifesto, it well might be that the actions of workers in China, India, Nigeria, and Brazil will have a greater impact on the prospects for socialism than that of workers in Europe and the United States. The study of the STO demonstrates that the site of struggle is in our everyday lives, against the obstacles that working people face there, not in books about their lives. To do that for over a decade, to involve real people in real struggles is never a lost cause. That activity and those experiences are part of human history and are worthy of our attention. There is a Black Gospel hymn that says “I may never reach perfection, but I tried.” That is the story of the STO that Michael Staudenmaier has told so well in the book you hold in your hands.

Amherst, Mass, March 2012
Acknowledgements

This book took just under seven years to complete, and for all but the last few months of that time I was an independent historian. As such, I experienced both an unusual sense of isolation in researching and writing this book, as well as a heightened feeling of reliance upon those who actively supported my work. One result of this contradiction is a rather lengthy list of acknowledgements.

First and foremost, none of what I have accomplished would have been possible without the incredible support of my wife Anne Carlson, as well as that of our children, Sofia and Nico. Anne is a gifted teacher who invariably brings a thoughtful and passionate eye to my work as well as to her own. In particular, her approach to questions of race and class in daily life has been immeasurably influential on my efforts to deal with such issues in this book.

A handful of other friends and comrades have supported me so completely in this project that they deserve special recognition. Kingsley Clarke, a former member of Sojourner Truth Organization (STO), saw the real-world political importance of my project very early on, and I might well have abandoned the job years ago had he not been so encouraging. Long ago, my brother, Peter Staudenmaier, set me on my path toward anarchism. Though he has pursued a slightly different trajectory as a radical historian, we regularly compare notes on our respective research, and he has always seen the very best in what I have accomplished. Christian Ogilvy has remained one of my very best friends and my closest political comrade during the entire time I’ve worked on this project, and his honest feedback has kept me grounded in the twenty-first century rather than the dusty seventies. Dan Berger offered the benefit of his experience as an independent scholar writing about the Weather Underground, and also gave me my first taste of peer-reviewed publishing. Krisna Best and Rob O’Dell, who initiated the online archive of STO
publications (www.sojournertruth.net) before they knew anything about my project, have been constant reminders that a concern for the legacy of STO is shared more broadly than I initially imagined.


Beyond former members, I also interviewed a small number of people who were contemporaries of STO. Their critical insights into an organization they never joined were essential to my research. Thanks to John Garvey, Macee Halk, Jose Lopez, J. Sakai, and Ethan Young. Sadly, Macee, about whose life and activities an entire book could (and should!) be written, died before this book was finished. When I interviewed him at his home on the south side of Chicago in 2006, his grandchildren Clifton and Kalynn politely requested that I mention them by name in the book I was writing; several years later, I’m happy to oblige.

Most of the archival research for this project was done in the basements, offices, storage closets, and filing cabinets of former members of STO. The book would never have come to be had it not been for the willingness of Janeen Porter and Don Hamerquist to allow me (and many other young anarchists) access to the dusty overstock piles at C&D Printshop in Chicago in the mid-nineties; my initial collection of STO publications came from there. Special thanks to Ed Voci, J. Sakai, and Noel Ignatiev in particular, each of whom gave me access to and/or copies of a large number of documents that would have likely been impossible to obtain anywhere else. Kingsley Clarke, Alan Rausch, and Carole Travis provided additional items, while Dave Ranney and Pat Wright
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One significant area of overlap between STO’s history and my own experience was work done in solidarity with the Puerto Rican independence movement. For many years, I worked at the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School in Chicago, and I still consider my time there to be among the most profound educational experiences of my life. This book, especially Chapter Five, benefitted immensely from years of conversation with Marvin Garcia, Michael Hannan, Jose Lopez, Lourdes Lugo, Alejandro Molina, and Michelle Morales, among many, many others.

During part of the time I worked on this book I was an active member of the Four Star Anarchist Organization, which along with Bring the Ruckus, the First of May Anarchist Alliance, Miami Autonomy and Solidarity, the Kasama Project, the Black Orchid Collective, and Unity and Struggle, reminds me that contemporary revolutionary groups are still learning from the legacy of STO, a quarter-century after its demise.

As my project neared completion, my life as an independent historian came to an end and I entered the PhD program in History at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign. A special thanks goes to Dave Roediger for his encouragement of both my independent research and my pursuit of graduate study. Thanks as well to Sundiata Cha-Jua, Zach Sell, and the participants in the Working Class History Reading Group, which gave me great feedback on a draft of Chapter Five.

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I have always been very close to my family. My dad, L. William Staudenmaier, was my first editor, and still one of the toughest I’ve ever had; he is also a big part of the reason I love long bike rides, nice beer, and the Green Bay Packers. My siblings, Ann Marie, Bill, Terry, Peter, and Suzanne, along with their spouses, partners, kids and pets, have always been a source of joy and strength. Finally, my mother, Kathleen Marie Staudenmaier, died before my book was completed. She was an absolute rock in my life, a brilliant and endlessly caring individual. I miss her every day. This book is dedicated to her memory.
Introduction: “A Donation for Anarchy”

In 1996, I was part of the collective that ran the Autonomous Zone, an anarchist “info-shop” in Chicago. Our biggest project that year was hosting a conference and a set of protests against the Democratic National Convention, held in our city that August. We called it “Active Resistance, a Counter-Convention,” and in the end it drew more than seven hundred young revolutionaries from all corners of North America to strategize and to mingle. Early on in the planning process, we decided to produce a poster that could be widely distributed in advance of the event. Tony Doyle, the most gifted artist in our collective, created a beautiful design, and Vic Speedwell was assigned the task of shopping it around to find an affordable print shop. When she arrived at the innocuously named C&D Printshop on the near west side, she had no idea the owners had a radical background, much less that the business had originated two decades prior as the in-house printing press for the Sojourner Truth Organization. So it was quite a surprise when Janeen Porter looked at the poster, then looked at her husband and co-owner Don Hamerquist, and said, “I think we could make a donation for anarchy, don’t you?” As a result, the Autonomous Zone only had to pay for materials; all labor was donated.

At the time, I had vaguely heard of STO, but knew very little about the group or its history. (I had never heard of Janeen or Don, even though Don had helped found the organization, was one of its leading theoreticians, and was the only person to remain a member from beginning to end of the group’s history.) That would change over the next few years as a number of us younger Chicago anarchists became friends and comrades not only with Janeen and Don, but also with a range of other veterans of STO. Along the way, I realized that Janeen’s spontaneous
decision to offer discounted printing services was not exactly exceptional in the context of her former group’s history. Throughout its existence, STO was committed to a pragmatic view of revolutionary struggle, looking for promising forms of activity and materially supporting them while offering critical perspectives and advice. Whether the terrain was the factory floor, the anti-imperialist milieu, or new social movements, the group demonstrated its firm commitment to revolution despite the dramatically changing circumstances of the seventies and eighties.

* * *

STO was a font of new and challenging ideas, as well as a fulcrum for revolutionary action. Among the areas of work in which the group immersed itself were (and this list is by no means exhaustive): workplace organizing, GI resistance, community-based antipolice efforts, women’s and especially reproductive rights, anti-imperialist solidarity, international networking with like-minded revolutionaries in Europe and Latin America, antifascist organizing, antinuclear and disarmament struggles, radical responses to state repression, opposition to US intervention in Central America and the Middle East, and youth and student radicalism. This book places special emphasis on some of these, while effectively ignoring others. In all cases, this was the result of difficult decisions made due to space constraints when organizing a monograph that was inevitably going to be too long.

Despite this wide range of activities, it is possible to create a rough but coherent narrative arc that categorizes STO’s trajectory into three distinct periods: a workplace-organizing period lasting approximately from 1970 through 1975, an anti-imperialist-solidarity era running more or less from 1976 through 1980, and a direct-action, tendency-building phase beginning at the end of the seventies and continuing through the group’s demise in the mid-eighties. These demarcations are not exact, as all three sorts of organizing continued at some level during all three periods. They also neglect a range of other essential components of STO’s work, including a continuing commitment to autonomous organizing by working-class women and an intense focus on theoretical development and internal education. Nonetheless, this book approximately follows such a scheme, with each phase being covered by a section of the text, in order to help shed light on STO’s unique place within the political movements that emerged in the aftermath of the sixties.

At its inception in Chicago at the end of 1969, STO was heavily influenced by the work of the Detroit-based League of Revolutionary
Black Workers. STO’s early emphasis was on organizing at the point of production, especially in large factories in the steel, auto, and manufacturing sectors. In contrast to many other groups of the same period also engaged in workplace organizing, STO rejected mainstream labor unions as a venue for struggle, to which it counterposed the option of “independent mass workers’ organizations.” The group’s members participated in the creation of several such organizations, in both unionized and non-union factories, always agitating for demands that challenged what STO described as the “bourgeois legality compromise.” This compromise doomed traditional unions, which necessarily were in the business of negotiating functional relationships between workers and management. STO’s activities within dozens of factories around the Chicagoland area resulted in hundreds of job actions during the early seventies, ranging from short-term sit-down work stoppages to longer wildcat strikes and sabotage at the worksite.

As the sixties receded further into the past and the independent labor upsurge of the early seventies waned, conflicts within STO over ideology and strategy led to a series of splits that nearly destroyed the group. The rebuilding process preserved the core commitments of the organization ideologically, but two shifts manifested. First, the group extended its reach geographically, becoming a regional organization and eventually growing to include members in a dozen states across the US. Second, STO began to emphasize the importance of national liberation struggles. Solidarity with, most prominently, the Puerto Rican independence movement and the Iranian student movement in the US, became central components of the group’s practical work. This transition produced a number of side effects, including an unorthodox take on the theoretical aspects of what Marxists called “the national question,” as well as an enhanced appreciation of the need for internal political and philosophical study.

As the eighties dawned, STO altered its strategy once again, distancing itself from the Stalinism of many of the national liberation movements it had previously supported, and turning its attention to building a revolutionary tendency within the so-called new social movements—the antinuclear movement and anti-Klan organizing, as well as youth/student, anti-intervention, and reproductive rights struggles, among others. Within this context, the group consistently encouraged militant direct action as a strategic orientation and emphasized the autonomy of all such movements. However, internal confusion about the implications of autonomy and the external pressures of the Reagan era led to a new series of splits and departures that undermined STO’s viability as a formal organization. By the late 1980s the group was defunct.
On an intellectual level, several key themes recur throughout the group’s history. In every area and at every point in time, STO emphasized the importance of mass action, the rejection of legal constraints on struggle, the question of consciousness within the working class, the central role of white supremacy to the continued misery of life under capitalism, and the necessity of autonomy for exploited and oppressed groups, not only from capitalism and white supremacy but also from their supposed representatives, various self-proclaimed vanguards, and any other “condescending saviors.”

Two essential theoretical innovations in particular marked STO’s contribution to the revolutionary left. First, the group re-articulated Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony as an analysis of “dual consciousness,” arguing that the working class displayed both a broad acceptance of the status quo and an embryonic awareness of its own revolutionary potential as a class. An early pamphlet produced by

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1 The latter phrase comes from the standard US translation of the lyrics to the “Internationale,” and was also part of the title of an STO pamphlet from the mid-seventies, “…no condescending saviors” by Noel Ignatin. The full stanza is:

We want no condescending saviors
To rule us from their judgment hall,
We workers ask not for their favors
Let us consult for all:
To make the thief disgorge his booty
To free the spirit from its cell,
We must ourselves decide our duty,
We must decide, and do it well.

2 The source of this term, in its usage by STO, is somewhat murky. Gramsci discusses the hypothetical worker as having “two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness).” *Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 333. W.E.B. Du Bois used the phrase “double consciousness” in his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classic, 1995 [1903]), 45, to describe the experience of black people living in a white supremacist society. Despite the group’s obvious debt to Du Bois, there is no clear evidence that his work was the source of STO’s usage. Don Hamerquist, who first introduced the term within STO, recalls Lenin’s critique of trade union consciousness as an important influence in how the organization used the term
STO suggested that “what is in the worker’s head is a source of power insofar as it reflects the worldview of the working class—and a source of weakness—insofar as it reflects the world view of the capitalist class.”

The task of revolutionaries was to help expand the level of proletarian consciousness through participation in mass struggle, while challenging the acquiescence to bourgeois consciousness. STO believed that this process required the creation of a revolutionary party, but it rejected what it called the “Stalin model” of party building in favor of an eclectic mix of organizational ideas drawn from Lenin and, especially as the eighties arrived, from the Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James.

The second quintessential aspect of STO’s revolutionary theory was its analysis of white-skin privilege as a bulwark of white supremacy. A founding member of the group, Noel Ignatin (now Ignatiev), helped pioneer the concept by reframing ideas initially advanced by W.E.B. Du Bois, especially in his classic work, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. According to the theory, people identified as “white” benefit from material and psychological advantages that people of color are denied. STO argued that white workers must “actively and militantly reject their partial, selfish and counterfeit interests as part of a group which is favored in relation to blacks, on behalf of their total, broad and true interests as part of a class which is coming alive.”

As a largely white group, STO saw its role as spurring the white working class in this direction and supporting organizing efforts emerging from black, Puerto Rican, and other nonwhite communities.

As the group moved closer to its own demise, a third key concept gained prominence within its theoretical universe: autonomy. Conceptually, autonomy was applied to a wide range of social groups—black people, other oppressed nations, women, youth, the working class as a whole. The list of those from whom autonomy must be sought and defended was similarly broad—capitalism and the state, but also trade unions, political parties, and even in many cases STO itself. This intense

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awareness of the need for real independence at the level of mass movements marked the final period of the group’s existence, and facilitated both high and low points in its existence. Closely tied to the theoretical focus on autonomy was a practical demand for militancy and a willingness to challenge legal boundaries in order to build a revolutionary movement. While there was a certain conceptual incoherence built into this constellation of ideas, most of STO’s clear-cut “successes” reflected a careful balance between acting as a radical pole inside broader struggles, on the one hand, and ensuring that mass movements had the freedom to determine their own trajectory. This was just as true in the factories of 1972 as it was in the antiwar protests of 1982. When STO failed—which was often—it was frequently because the balance was tipped too far in one direction or the other.

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A brief explanation of the title of this book is perhaps in order. For a long time, the working title was the unwieldy mouthful “Revolutionaries Who Tried to Think,” which was drawn from Ignatiev’s reflections on STO’s distinctiveness within the US left of its era. Eventually, *Truth and Revolution* was chosen both for its play on the group’s name and for the way in which it calls attention to fundamental questions of radical theory and practice. In the hands of the historical left, “truth” and “revolution” have too often had a troubled relationship. STO’s critique of Stalinism reflected the rejection of a methodology that presented the revolutionary party as the source of scientific knowledge and revolutionary truth. Much more recently, Hamerquist has called for “organizational forms that are mobile and flexible, and that are looking to intervene, not because they have the truth, but as a part of the development of the will to create new truths.”

At the same time, STO itself was sometimes

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less than saintly in its own attempts to demarcate the supposed truth of its own positions. “Truth” is a difficult and complicated idea to define, but it is precisely this complexity and ambiguity that make the term apt as a bookend with “revolution” when conceptualizing the history of STO. The chapters that follow address questions of truth only obliquely, but contemporary revolutionaries have much to gain in viewing STO through the dual prism suggested by the title.

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This book covers a lot of terrain. It describes events that took place during three different decades, in locations all over the world, from Chicago, New York, and Kansas City to Puerto Rico, Italy, and Iran. While focusing on the specific trajectory of a single, small organization, it attempts to shed light on the broader history of the international revolutionary left over the last half century. STO was both exemplary and exceptional when considered in the context of the movements that emerged from the end of the sixties. It grappled with a set of problems that were nearly universal—the contradictions of race and class, the failure of revolutionary struggles to establish or maintain free and egalitarian societies, the need to incorporate the work of conscious revolutionaries into mass struggles, and so forth. Yet its proposals for dealing with these problems were proudly unorthodox, drawing on a range of sources in the Marxist, revolutionary nationalist, feminist, and other radical traditions. While claiming the mantle of Leninism, STO diverged sharply from most standard interpretations of that term.

In the pages that follow, I attempt to balance an intellectual history of STO’s theoretical innovations with a social history of the group’s real world activities. This task is, of course, more easily identified than accomplished, in part because the available written materials (both published and internal) tend to focus on theory at the expense of practice. Oral history interviews with former members only partially redressed this imbalance. But for me, as for STO, it remains a fundamental premise that ideas can only obtain their value, and indeed their validation,

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in the messy world in which we actually live. As a result, in addition to discussions of consciousness and white skin privilege and autonomy, these pages include stories of getting, keeping, and losing jobs, reflections on popular music and spectator sports, descriptions of protests and conferences, and commentary on organizational questions that may on first glance seem needlessly obscure. The goal is not to be eclectic, but to be true to the complex life of any revolutionary group. Considered as a whole, the historical arc of the Sojourner Truth Organization has much to teach contemporary radicals, especially those aspiring to be revolutionaries who try to think as well as act. This book is intended as a modest contribution to the creation of a framework for moving forward by looking closely at a small slice of the past.
Part Two: Dreams Found and Lost

Lives on the line where dreams are found and lost
I’ll be there on time and I’ll pay the cost

Bruce Springsteen, “Darkness on the Edge of Town”
Chapter Four: Reorganization in Difficult Times

The way Noel Ignatiev tells the story, one of the key turning points in his political life took place during a conversation with Don Hamerquist in the fall of 1969, not long before the founding of STO. At the time, Ignatin was still within the orbit of Stalinism, although he was already well on his way to the unorthodox Leninism that would characterize his future path. Hamerquist had only recently left the CPUSA, but his own political shift had begun a few years previous. Both men were well versed in the endless debates that dominated the new left as the decade came to a close, including the question of the Sino-Soviet split.

The Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China were the largest and the third largest countries in the world, respectively, and they both claimed leading roles in the world communist movement. Tensions between their Communist Parties had reached a boiling point in the early sixties, several years after Nikita Khrushchev succeeded Joseph Stalin as

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1  Noel Ignatiev, author interview, January 2006. As indicated previously, Ignatin changed his name to Ignatiev after his departure from STO. I use Ignatiev when describing his current positions (including relaying this story) and Ignatin when describing his activities and the positions he held before and during his time in STO.

head of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev had initiated a significant shift in Soviet foreign policy that included substantial accommodation with the United States and other western powers, while Mao Tse-Tung was propelling the Chinese government into a series of confrontations with the US and its allies. One side effect of this conflict was China’s posthumous embrace of Stalin as a great revolutionary who had defeated Hitler and dramatically expanded the reach of the international communist movement while challenging post-war US global hegemony. From this perspective, Stalin’s legacy had been repudiated by Khrushchev’s efforts at “peaceful co-existence.” As was the case in any number of contexts, much of the North American new left took its cues from Mao and China, leading to a hagiographic treatment of Stalin that continued throughout the seventies and into the eighties.

In this context, Hamerquist dropped a bombshell: according to Ignatiev, he argued that Khrushchev was not a repudiation of Stalin, but a continuation of his politics. The implication was clear: Stalin had not been a revolutionary icon worthy of the admiration of the new left. Rather, he—like Khrushchev—had been an opportunist, a bureaucrat, a dictator above and against the proletariat, a brake on the engine of revolution. This view of Stalin was not without precedent, of course, but within non-Trotskyist versions of Leninism it was highly unusual.

3 A number of writers have indicated that the public embrace of Stalin’s legacy by the Chinese Communists was not entirely genuine, and that Mao and other leaders of the CPC had a number of private reservations about Stalin’s role. See Ignatiev, “…no condescending saviors,” as well as Russell Jacoby, “Stalinism and China,” in Radical America 10, no.3 (May/June 1976), 7–24.

4 Interview with Noel, January 2006. Hamerquist does not remember this precise conversation, but has indicated that Ignatiev’s narrative does accurately portray his (Hamerquist’s) views at the time.

5 Trotskyists, of course, built an entire analysis around opposition to Stalin and his legacy, while anarchists and assorted ultraleft sectors of the left rejected not only Stalin and Khrushchev but the entire trajectory of Leninism. The literature here is enormous, but the basic outline of the Trotskyist critique of Stalin can be gleaned from A. Belden Fields, Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States (New York: Autonomedia, 1988), 14–16. Various ultra-left criticisms of Leninism are detailed in Richard Gombin, The Radical Tradition: A Study in Revolutionary Thought (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), while the general anarchist response to Bolshevism is
Hamerquist had come to this perspective after intense personal experience inside the CPUSA, extensive study of the Communist history and theory, and much exposure to social movements outside the Party’s direct control. In essence, he had determined that in order to advance the cause of revolution, it was necessary to leave behind the organizational forms and strategies he grouped under the heading “the Stalin model.”\(^6\)

Ignatin was convinced, and he was not alone. The initial work of the Sojourner Truth Organization was devoted above all else to the development and implementation of revolutionary strategies that could overcome the obstacles presented not only by capital and the state, but also by the dominant revolutionary traditions of the era, including especially Stalinism. But in its early years, STO devoted relatively little attention to the organizational questions implied by its rejection of Stalinism. As previously noted, the group initially adopted a policy of “refusing to impose discipline on matters of theory and fighting for discipline on matters of practice.” One practical result of this approach was a lack of theoretical coherence and, as we have seen, a series of debilitating splits. Only after its near collapse in 1974 did STO begin to seriously address issues of revolutionary organization. Nonetheless, to understand the resurrection of STO in the mid-seventies, it is necessary to back up slightly and assess the state of the US left in the early part of the decade.

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By 1972, the New Communist Movement (NCM) had become one of the most vibrant tendencies to emerge from the ashes of the sixties new left, and within the NCM, the Revolutionary Union (RU) and the October League (OL) were recognized as the largest and most influential organizations. STO, among others, had already attacked the politics of both the RU and the OL, but these political criticisms did not automatically result in the growth of an organizational alternative. Movement toward developing such a tendency took the form of a conference outside of Cincinnati, Ohio in October 1972.\(^7\) Known subsequently as the Grailville Conference (for the suburb where the conference took

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6 This formulation recurs in Hamerquist’s writings, but one of the earliest occurrences is found in TARP, 43.

7 For more on Grailville, see Elbaum, Revolution in the Air, 106.
place), it brought together a few hundred “independent” Leninists, some individuals and some in smaller collectives, who for one reason or another had not joined one of the larger organizations. STO was heavily involved in planning the conference, which it initially viewed as a likely framework for unifying the participants. In the event, however, the political differences among the attendees proved overwhelming. STO retreated back to its ongoing work in Chicago, and left the post-conference networking to others.

Over the next two years, while STO suffered through the “Crisis” and “Balloon” splits, a number of other Grailville veterans developed a loose network of like-minded groups, largely but not exclusively located in Midwestern cities: St. Louis, Kansas City, Louisville, Danville, IL, New York, and Boston, as well as Chicago. The looseness was even reflected in the name(s) given to the grouping, which was sometimes referred to as the “Coalition,” sometimes the “Confederation,” and sometimes the “Midwest Federation” (despite the participation from two east coast cities); similarly, the member groups were sometimes “Independent Marxist Collectives,” and at other points “Independent Marxist-Leninist Organizations.” Regardless of the name, however, the participants were united largely by their rejection of the politics advanced by the RU and OL (as well as Trotskyist groups like the International Socialists (IS) and other left organizations outside the New Communist Movement), by their embrace of the white skin privilege analysis, and by their emphasis on mass work in factories, hospitals, the military, and other venues.

In the aftermath of the “Balloon” split, STO was reduced to a handful of members, and for a brief time even lost its franchise on the name “Sojourner Truth” to a coalition of splitters who technically constituted a majority. Both versions of STO participated in the Federation. Until the new grouping disintegrated in 1975, the once-and-future STO was known within the Federation as “STO(X),” or simply “the (X).” The (X) was more active, partly because its small numbers made its previous forms of mass work impossible to maintain. As a matter of survival, STO(X) focused its efforts on rebuilding its membership, and building links with like-minded revolutionaries outside Chicago was an important part of this process. By 1975, STO(X) was heavily involved in the Federation’s discussions around the creation of a coherent revolutionary organization. The debate over whether and how to accomplish this task provides substantial insight into the strategic approach taken by STO—the (X),

8 Noel Ignatiev, email to the author, May 3, 2006.
to be precise—in its middle period, from the mid-seventies through the end of the decade.

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The question of organizational unification among the various groups within the Federation was quite contentious from the start. One pole, led largely by the then-unnamed “Boston Group,” argued that “it is only around theoretical positions, organizational principles, strategic and tactical line that communist unity can be achieved.” In other words, theoretical unity necessarily preceded organizational unity. In support for this view, the Boston Group marshaled a famous quote from Mao himself: “The correctness or otherwise of the ideological and political line decides everything.” This position was counterposed to the argument that “a more centralized organizational structure will more readily permit struggle over programmatic and theoretical differences.” In this scenario, the practical work of building a democratic centralist organization would precipitate further theoretical unification. This was STO(X)’s position. What appeared at first glance to be a chicken-and-egg question around

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9 Boston Group, “A Perspective on Organizational Structure,” in Collective Works #2, March 1975, 5. The “Boston Group” later became the Proletarian Unity League (PUL), and eventually helped form the Freedom Road Socialist Organization. In this context, there is a certain irony to PUL’s later (1981) autobiographical description: “When it first formed, the group had not settled all the major questions, or even all the most important ones.” PUL, “Proletarian Unity League: Where We Came From, What We Look Like, What We Do” (1981). Available online at http://www.freedomroad.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=237:family-tree-proletarian-unity-league&catid=171:our-history&Itemid=264&clang=en, accessed October 18, 2011.


11 Ibid., 3.
theory and practice revealed, on a deeper level, the divisions between the highly unorthodox Leninism of the (X) and the more traditional positions put forward by the Boston Group. At the root, the dispute revolved around differing understandings of the classic Leninist organizational principle known as “democratic centralism.”

While most of the participating groups in the Federation embraced some version of democratic centralism, they disagreed profoundly about the proper definition of this important term. Once again, the strongest advocates of the opposing positions were the Boston Group and STO(X). Boston argued that “democratic centralism is precisely the organizational form recognizing the necessity for a single direction of the proletariat and disciplined democratic discussion of its strategic and tactical options.” In counterposing this to what it called “federalism,” the Boston Group further defined democratic centralism by clarifying what it was not: “federalism also implies the equality and inviolable integrity of different political lines … but liberalism of this kind is incompatible with an organization seeking to serve the interests of the oppressed and the exploited.” Although the Boston Group did not believe that there was sufficient unity within the Federation to establish democratic centralism as its internal operating system, it made clear its political disdain for the alternatives.

In response to Boston, STO(X) unleashed its two biggest intellectual guns, Ignatin and Hamerquist, to present a very different vision of democratic centralism. Ignatin characterized the (X)’s critique of the Boston position as two-fold: “1. Differences [within a democratic centralist organization] cannot be anticipated and eliminated solely through a process of pure reason. 2. The party will always contain differences, even important ones, within it. This is not a ‘weakness’ to be ‘eliminated through struggle.’” Hamerquist went even further, arguing that

when Boston treats democratic centralism as a desirable, but remote, goal for the [Federation], they are applying a very mechanical, almost arbitrary, notion of what democratic

12 A straightforward explanation of democratic centralism and its historical development as a concept can be found in the online “Marxist Encyclopedia” project, available here: http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/d/e.htm#democratic-centralism accessed October 18, 2011.
14 Ibid.
centralism must be. It must be that internal regimen known popularly as “Stalinism”: assumption of leadership infallibility; assumption that Marxism has already answered all important questions; the banning of “factions”; strict limits on internal debate; and the prohibition of any public manifestations of internal division. … [A]ll these points … have little or nothing to do with democratic centralism, in my opinion.\(^1\)

This critique, especially the negative view of Stalinism, represented a continuation of STO’s longtime opposition to the orthodox Leninism of groups like the RU and the OL, now focused on a member group of the Federation itself.

Rather than reject democratic centralism, STO(X) put forward a competing definition that focused heavily on the importance of practical work in determining political line. Again, Hamerquist took the lead:

For the [Federation], democratic centralism means a decision to carry out joint activity … without such a decision, and such activities, it is quite possible to continue to function as if every position and tendency had equal status. Second, it means implementation of divisions into clear majorities and minorities on all disputed questions with the understanding that the majority “rules.” Third, it means that a minimum concern with developing our political position into a coherent perspective entails the organizational purging of elements which consistently adopt minority positions which are closer to that of other political tendencies than to the [Federation]. Fourth, it means a very careful and reasoned concern with not mechanically imposing a majority decision on the minority, for the simple reason that no minority that is serious will accept such treatment in a grouping so new and so weak. Fifth, it means definite protections of the right of minorities to argue their position.\(^2\)

This exhaustive detailing of democratic centralism served multiple purposes: it not only articulated a coherent alternative to the more

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17 Ibid. Ellipsis in original.
traditional understanding of democratic centralism that was no doubt widespread within the Federation, it also served as a shot across Boston’s bow in the form of the “organizational purging” clause, and it set forth the basic short-term organizational goals of the (X)’s participation in the Federation.

As these political disputes continued over the course of 1975, it became increasingly clear that the Boston Group was losing the battle of opinion within the Federation. Most of the Midwestern groups, despite a variety of other disagreements, sided with STO(X) on the definition of democratic centralism and its immediate applicability to the Federation. By the summer, the Boston Group withdrew from the Federation, along with the collective based in New York, but not before Hamerquist launched one more salvo against Stalinism as a general proposition. In advancing a set of “Discussion Points on the Party and Revolutionary Strategy,” he offered the most direct rejection of Stalinism STO had yet put forward:

The Leninist conception of the party must be recaptured from Stalinist distortion. We take this to involve the following points (at least): (A) Party life must emphasize clear, sharp and critical debate over points of principle. Furthermore, the maximum effort must be extended to make this debate accessible to the working class. Fear of public differences and of “factions” is no part of Leninist theory or practice on the question of the party. (B) The ability of a party to play a vanguard role (and thus to truly be able to exercise discipline) is not given a priori. It is gained through a process of demonstrating to the masses of people that it is able to define and attack the burning questions of the day, that it is able to articulate and organize popular aspirations in a framework of class struggle, that it can recognize and correct mistakes before they lead it to catastrophe or irrelevance. (C) The notion that the party leads by virtue of being the guardian of the “science of Marxism-Leninism” inevitably leads to distortion of the scientific character of Marxist theory, and a misunderstanding of the potential of the party to operate “scientifically.” (D) The so-called “party principle” must be cleared of any implication that runs contrary to the central Marxist thesis that the emancipation
In a way, this analysis, offered at the midpoint of the decade, can be seen as a pivot in the theoretical development of STO’s approach to organization. From 1970 to 1975, the group had moved closer and closer to a traditional party-building model, progressively abandoning the more spontanist aspects of its early embrace of mass work in the factories as the labor upsurge declined. The winnowing process within the Federation represented the closest STO ever came to creating “the Party.” As much as Hamerquist’s indictment of Stalinism assumed the validity of the party-building idea, it also contained the kernels of STO’s eventual rejection of that model, especially in its final assertion regarding the class and the party. As the decade came to a close, STO would edge ever closer to a version of autonomist Marxism heavily influenced by C.L.R. James, which tended to view the class and the party as antagonists rather than partners. But the process that led to this conclusion was complicated, and began with the death of the Federation and the rebirth of a new, expanded Sojourner Truth Organization.

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Once the Boston group departed from the Federation, the remaining collectives were largely united in their strategic approach to revolution. After shedding the St. Louis and Danville groups in a series of conflicts over relations with the growing anti-imperialist trend within the North American left, the three remaining member organizations—STO in Chicago, Workforce in Kansas City, and the Haymarket Organization in Davenport, Iowa—agreed in early 1976 to merge into a single organization, adopting Hamerquist’s version of democratic centralism along the way. Chicago was identified as the “center” of the organization, and STO’s name was retained for the group as a whole, which was possible because the other version of STO had ceased to exist.19

19 There is some disagreement about the basis for this decision. The pre-eminence of Ignatin and Hamerquist as both experienced organizers and as major theoreticians, and their location in the Chicago area, may have played the decisive role. However, Alan Rausch, then a member of the Haymarket Organization, recalls that the naming decision was not a result of deference to the Chicago comrades, and more the outcome
At a conference in Iowa early that summer, a series of position papers were adopted, known later as the “Coe Resolutions,” after the college campus that hosted the meeting. These resolutions addressed everything from the organizational principles of the newly restructured group (for example, the clause that allowed the expulsion of “consistent minorities” was formally approved) to an analysis of the short-term prospects for revolutionary movements. On this subject, the group made a significant departure from its previous approach, in essence decentering the workplace as a site of social struggle, while acknowledging the rising momentum of a range of anti-imperialist movements within the United States, especially those for Puerto Rican independence, New Afrikan liberation, and revolution in Iran (see Chapter Five for more on this). The theoretical justification for this strategic shift was an analysis that the industrial working class in the United States was entering a period STO called “the lull,” which the group expected to last for several years before a resurgent working-class radicalism would re-invigorate shop-floor efforts. In the mean time, the group decided its efforts were better focused on internal education (especially around the theoretical topics we’ll discuss in Chapter Six) and on direct support for third world revolutionaries. While many members of STO still worked in factories, there was no longer any organizational encouragement to concentrate in particular worksites or industries.

Structurally, the new version of STO was based around a regular “General Membership Meeting” (GMM) which debated political issues, set policy, and determined strategic priorities, normally via a majority vote of members on a series of resolutions. Between GMMs, the leadership body was the National Committee (NC), which was elected by the membership at each GMM and was supposed to meet face-to-face on a quarterly basis. The NC was responsible for guiding internal discussions on political and strategic questions, and for ensuring the implementation of decisions made at each GMM. To deal with travel and communication difficulties, members of the National Committee who resided in Chicago constituted a Central Committee (CC), which was tasked with making certain tactical decisions between NC meetings. This arrangement reinforced the traditional leading role of several Chicago members of the group, especially Hamerquist and Ignatin, although they were not consistently members of the National or Central Committees. In general, of a general satisfaction with the historical and political resonance of the name “Sojourner Truth.” Conversation with the author, August 1, 2009.
the organizational structure adopted at the Coe Conference was designed to reflect the version of democratic centralism advocated with the Federation by Hamerquist and others. In practice, it resulted in a somewhat flawed hybrid of democratic control and informal hierarchy. Even when certain leading members of STO were not in formally elected positions on the NC or CC, their base of power within the group was still substantial.

In an attempt to behave more like a party-building organization, STO began to use the National Committee as a framework for addressing the political implications of personal decisions facing individual members. This approach had long been common within the group for questions of employment, but as the organization expanded geographically, it came to be applied more broadly to life decisions. For instance, if a member in one city was considering leaving that city for any of a variety of personal reasons (personal conflicts, lack of work, etc.), the NC would weigh in with a recommendation on where that person should move. While these decisions were not normally binding on the members in question, they were almost always agreed to. As a result, in the mid- to late seventies, STO members were “sent to” cities as diverse as Denver, Portland, Philadelphia, and New York, as well as more traditional “placements” in Chicago and Kansas City.

Another aspect of the Coe Resolutions that was to become significant in the coming period concerned the racial composition of STO’s membership. While the group had always been open to members regardless of race, it had also traditionally been overwhelmingly white, partly as a result of its commitment to autonomy for radical movements of people of color. The Coe Resolutions for the first time approved an organizational position on the recruitment of members of color (or “third world members,” in the terminology of the resolutions). Given STO’s strong commitment to autonomy and national liberation, it was unsurprising that the Coe Resolution focused on “Third World Revolutionary Organizations and the Party Building Process.”20 Beginning with the premise that “a multinational communist party in this country will develop mainly through the gradual merging of Third World communist groups with organizations that are largely white,” the resolution advocated for nonwhite members of STO to shift toward membership in revolutionary groups of their specific race or nationality whenever appropriate. Thus,

20 The Coe Resolution of this name is attached as “Appendix I” to the unpublished document “The Reasons for the Split in STO: White Chauvinism in Practice,” in author’s possession. Subsequent quotes are from the resolution as presented in this appendix.
“it is the policy of STO to encourage Third World cadre to join and take discipline from Third World revolutionary organizations if they perceive that joining such organizations will enhance the development of these organizations.” With this substantial caveat, STO was formally open to accepting members of color, and within a year of the Coe Conference the group had indeed added four members of color (two black women, a latino man, and a latina woman), a small but substantial number for a group that still numbered fewer than fifty people.

This new policy inevitably exacerbated a long-standing tension within STO, between the belief in the necessity of a multiracial revolutionary movement and the support for autonomous organizing within communities of color. In contrast to other largely white revolutionary groups that deliberately recruited members of color at least partly in order to diversify their demographic composition, STO was always gun-shy about this approach, with several ex-members recalling a shared disdain for the tokenism they saw in the recruitment efforts of groups like the RU/RCP. Indeed, STO’s practice during the period after the Coe conference was to avoid “recruiting TW [third world] members without [first] consulting with national liberation organizations to which they might belong and with which STO had working relationships.” In formalizing the view that the coming revolutionary party would develop from the merger of several revolutionary groups with different demographics and largely under the leadership of radicals of color, the newly restructured STO gained a justification for remaining overwhelmingly white. But at the same time, the support for “third world” autonomy necessarily resulted in an openness to admitting members of color who directly expressed an interest in STO’s political direction and practical work. This Coe Resolution attempted to bridge the gap by suggesting that membership in STO should be a transitional phase for black or latina/o revolutionaries on their way to eventual membership in their “appropriate” national liberation movements, but this perspective discounted the possibility that such revolutionaries might feel more at home politically within STO than in other organizational structures. The seeds of eventual conflict were more or less built into the self-conception that emerged from the Coe Conference.

21 Author interviews with Kingsley Clarke, Don Hamerquist, David Ranney.
Regardless of any subtle tensions, STO emerged from Coe stronger and more vital than it had been in some time. With established branches in a variety of locations, and with a refocused set of strategic priorities, the group was able to engage in many different areas of work. In addition to solidarity work with national liberation movements, the group undertook the substantial task of developing a theoretical pole within the North American left. Now straddling the New Communist Movement and the anti-imperialist white left, STO resumed an aggressive publishing schedule, issuing a series of pamphlets on key topics and using its network of contacts to distribute them nationally and even overseas. This included re-issuing the classic piece *Toward a Revolutionary Party*, producing a collection of pieces themed around *Understanding and Fighting White Supremacy*, and introducing important new pamphlets on topics like *White Supremacy and the Afro-American National Question* and *Rape, Racism, and the White Women’s Movement*. STO produced so many publications during this period that, shortly after the Coe Conference, it distributed a trifold leaflet advertising fourteen different pamphlets under the heading “Literature from Sojourner Truth Organization.” Including sections on “General Strategy,” “White Supremacy and the National Question,” and “Production Organizing,” the leaflet was representative of the group’s ongoing political transformation. “Despite some changes in our strategic conceptions,” according to the leaflet, “we continue to reprint all of our literature that we feel is relevant to current revolutionary concerns so that our development is open for examination.”

This flurry of publications was a direct result of STO’s declaration of the “lull,” which meant that limited energies were better spent organizing the left itself rather than attempting to organize the class. It was also made possible by STO’s earlier investment in a printing press, which by the mid-seventies had been incorporated into a full-scale printshop that

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23 British radical Kevin McDonnell indicates that STO pamphlets were available for sale in a variety of radical bookshops in London during the mid-seventies. Email to author, May 8, 2009.

provided continuous employment to one or more STO members until the group’s final demise in the mid-eighties. This in-house press allowed STO to produce substantial print runs of a large number of pamphlets with an increasingly professional design. Where early STO publications were routinely based on text produced on typewriters, by the mid-seventies the printshop had incorporated typesetting equipment that looked quite sharp by the pre-computer standards of the era.

In contrast to many other left groups that engaged in regular publication, STO’s efforts in this arena were not normally focused on proclaiming official organizational position papers. Instead, a number of the main documents published in 1976 were openly billed as “discussion papers,” meaning that they were intended to argue for claims that were not just controversial within the left but were contentious inside STO as well. Hamerquist’s White Supremacy and the Afro-American National Question fell into this category, as did Ignatin’s long essay published under the title “…no condescending saviors”, which amounted to an extended argument for the position that the then-existing “socialist” governments of the world—especially the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba—were actually implementing a version of “state capitalism.” Drawing heavily on the analysis of C.L.R. James in his classic work State Capitalism and World Revolution, but built largely around Ignatin’s review of the relevant literature, the pamphlet was not only not a formal position paper, it probably never reflected a majority position within STO. This reflected both the group’s commitment to airing internal political disputes in public, as well as the high level of influence wielded by Ignatin personally within STO.

The crux of Ignatin’s argument, at least in terms of the Soviet Union, amounts to a restatement of Hamerquist’s revelatory reframing of the issue in 1969, as described early in this chapter. Ignatin argues that the classic Maoist line on Russia—that capitalism was “restored” there by Khrushchov in 1957—is illogical and inconsistent with the known facts. Instead, he proposes, “There are only two opinions on this matter that meet minimum standards of reasonableness: either socialism exists in the Soviet Union, in spite of any backward steps that may have been taken by the revisionists; or socialism was never attained there, and the

25 The printshop continued to operate as a commercial enterprise until approximately 2002, largely under the direction of two former members of STO, printing a variety of materials for various left, community-based, commercial, and music-oriented projects.

26 See C.L.R. James (with Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee), State Capitalism and World Revolution (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986 [1950]).
Khrushchev-Brezhnev policies represent, in the most fundamental sense, not a reversal but a continuation of previous policies.” Ignatin makes it clear that he endorses the latter scenario, and much of his pamphlet focuses on documenting this line of argument with extensive use of Lenin’s own writings, as well as references to the historiography of the Russian Revolution.

According to Ignatin, Lenin himself advocated for the necessity of state capitalism as a response to the economic crises facing the Soviet Union in the years immediately following the revolution. Under this analysis, the New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced in 1921, “was an alliance between the Soviet state and large-scale capitalism, against the petty capitalism which then prevailed.” The real question, however, concerns not economic policy but political issues around the structure of the Soviet state. Lenin believed that the danger of state capitalism could be contained by the increasingly powerful and revolutionary state apparatus. But instead of “broaden[ing] the base of participation in state affairs,” the Bolsheviks “chose another course, to rely increasingly on the Party to perform the administrative tasks of the new state.”

Stalin’s innovation was not the single-party state as such, but the attending “theory of the party as the repository of all knowledge, whose task was to mobilize the population to carry out its directives.”

His critique of Soviet state capitalism notwithstanding, Ignatin defends Lenin’s political integrity to a great extent, arguing that the Bolsheviks were “forced” to follow such a course, and further claiming that in Lenin’s last year of life he saw the error of the NEP and attempted to combat the new scourge of state capitalism with a “damning criticism of the Soviet regime.” But it was too late; Lenin died in 1924 and was replaced by Stalin, who dramatically expanded the reach and depth of Soviet state capitalism and its attendant bureaucracies. In Ignatin’s analysis, Lenin’s theory of the party bears no responsibility for the “subsequent degeneration of the Soviet Union.” This maneuver to absolve Lenin of the sins of Stalin was by now familiar to those who followed STO’s political development, and it was certainly of a piece with Hamerquist’s earlier defense of democratic centralism.

27 Ignatin, “…no condescending saviors” (Chicago: STO, 1976), 9.
28 Ibid., 13.
29 Ibid., 18.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 14.
32 Ibid., 18.
Ignatin also pays considerable attention to the twists and turns of both Soviet and Chinese foreign policies, but within a framework where “a country’s foreign policy is an extension of its domestic one.” Thus, neither Soviet efforts to constrain the revolutionary efforts of subordinate Communist parties in the third world (what the Maoists called “social-imperialism”), nor the notorious support of the Chinese Communists for reactionary forces in Africa and Latin America, were in themselves the central problem. They were instead symptomatic of the continued power of capitalism in the two largest so-called Communist countries in the world. Ignatin issues a direct challenge to other US revolutionaries, such as the October League, who had an unfortunate tendency to pursue to the extreme the logic of “my enemy’s enemy is my friend,” defending China and excoriating the Soviet Union, even when such a position was functionally identical to that of the United States government itself. In contrast, argues Ignatin, “we remain firmly committed to the traditional stance of communists in an imperialist country—for American workers, the enemy is at home!” Despite substantial differences over the nature of the Soviet and Chinese regimes, this strategic conclusion was one that all members of STO would have strongly embraced.

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Pamphlets weren’t the only publishing method STO used to heighten its political profile. Less than a year after the Coe Conference, the first issue of *Urgent Tasks* appeared, heralding one of STO’s lasting contributions to the US left. *UT*, as it was often known, was a well-produced, well-written, and well-distributed magazine that promoted STO’s political stance in a consistent fashion in fourteen issues over the course of the next five years. The title was drawn, unsurprisingly, from Lenin, specifically from the title of the editorial in the first issue of the pre-Bolshevik newspaper *Iskra*, published in 1900, “The Urgent Tasks of Our Movement.” Every issue contained the same brief quotation from its namesake document: “… not to serve the working class at each of its stages, but to represent the interests of the movement as a whole, to point out to this movement its ultimate aim and its political tasks, and to safeguard its political and ideological independence.”

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33 Ibid., 2.
34 Ibid.
35 Quoted from *Urgent Tasks* #1, May, 1977, inside front cover. The original can be found (with a slightly different translation) in V.I. Lenin,
the fifth issue onward, the subtitle “Journal of the Revolutionary Left” was appended. The editorial board was elected by STO’s membership on a regular basis, and Ignatin served as editor for almost every issue after the fifth. Each issue of the magazine was designed, typeset, and printed at STO’s printshop.

Early issues of UT contained a series of strident polemics by STO members against erstwhile allies and opponents like the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee and the Philadelphia Workers’ Organizing Committee.36 But the range of topics and authors began to broaden, and the quality of design and layout improved substantially, allowing UT to develop into a solid and nondogmatic publication that was taken seriously by a significant section of the left by the end of the decade. The journal regularly featured new translations of important documents from revolutionaries in places like Iran, Italy, Poland, and Puerto Rico. When STO approved organizational position papers on various topics, normally under the rubric of “theses,” these were published in UT for maximum distribution. Thus the “Theses on White Supremacy and the National Question,” approved by the GMM in May 1977, were published in Number Two (October 1977), while the “Theses on Fascism,” approved by the GMM in April 1981, were published in the penultimate issue, Number Thirteen (Spring 1982).

Beginning with Number Three (Spring 1978), a clarification was printed alongside the listing of the editorial board: “Signed articles do not necessarily express the views of Sojourner Truth Organization.”37 Only rarely were author biographies provided, so it was impossible for most outsiders to know whether a signed piece had been penned by an STO member or not. As time went on, a significant number of items in almost every issue were written by nonmembers, although behind the


36 The Prairie Fire Organizing Committee (PFOC) was one of the leading groups in the white, anti-imperialist solidarity movement of the seventies, while the Philadelphia Workers’ Organizing Committee (PWOC) was a relatively late arrival in the New Communist Movement. By 1977, when the first issue of UT was published, both groups were quite prominent in the US left. For more on PFOC, see Chapter Five of this book, as well as Dan Berger, Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006). For more on PWOC, see Elbaum, Revolution in the Air.

37 Quoted from Urgent Tasks #3, Spring 1978, inside front cover.
scenes, members were being strongly encouraged to contribute. Some pieces in *UT* addressed theoretical issues such as Marx’s law of value, some were concerned with historical topics like the nature of slavery before the Civil War, and some focused on strategic questions that spoke directly to the ongoing work of STO. This last category, over the duration of *UT*’s lifespan, included articles on factory organizing, antinuclear work, fascism and antifascism, and the nature of the movement for gay liberation, among other topics. Most of these articles were written by STO members, as were the periodically published study guides on topics like Reconstruction and dialectics.

The twelfth issue of *UT* was almost certainly the most well-received by the left outside of STO, even though it lacked any articles with immediate implications for strategy. This issue, guest edited by the founding and long-time editor of *Radical America*, Paul Buhle, was a celebration of “C.L.R. James: His Life and Work.” James had been an ever-growing influence on the politics of Ignatin and other members of STO as the seventies progressed. The 132-page tome dwarfed all other issues of the magazine, and may have earned Ignatin as much scorn inside STO as it garnered praise in the outside world. Dozens of well-known radicals from several continents contributed reminiscences, reflections, and assessments of various aspects of James’s written output, his organizing work, and his personal life. Of the authors, however, only two—Ignatin and Ken Lawrence—were members of STO; though the organization was clearly influenced by James and his politics, most of the membership was not engaged with the project. This unusual and decidedly unrepresentative publication went on to become one of the most widely known items ever produced by STO; its contents were even subsequently republished as a book in Great Britain. Ironically, while Ignatin and STO were drawn to James largely because of his major contributions to revolutionary theory and his unorthodox approach to organizational and cultural questions, the publication of the special issue of *UT* coincided almost perfectly with the rise of James as an acceptable and safe topic for academic study.

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While considerations of general revolutionary theory and strategy were certainly important to STO during this period, the organization remained

38 See, for example, Noel Ignatin, “Even More Urgently on *UT*,” in *Internal Discussion Bulletin* #7, Jan/Feb 1979, 39–40.

39 See *Urgent Tasks* #12, Summer 1981.
concerned about a number of issues that might be seen as more immediate. Foremost among these, of course, were white supremacy and patriarchy, which together helped worsen the misery of capitalism for the vast majority of the world’s population. The same flurry of publication that led to “…no condescending saviors” also produced one of STO’s most widely distributed, and most controversial, pamphlets, Allison Edwards’s *Rape, Racism, and the White Women’s Movement: An Answer to Susan Brownmiller*. Brownmiller was a well-known white feminist writer and activist who, in 1975, published a best-selling book entitled *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. Widely regarded as a key text in the mainstream acceptance of the feminist movement, *Against Our Will* positions rape as a central weapon in the continued oppression of women by men. “From prehistoric times to the present,” argues Brownmiller, “rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.”

In terms of race, the book maintains that “interracial rape remains a huge political embarrassment to liberals.” It examines in some detail the ways in which the US left, especially the CPUSA, chose to highlight the plight of black men wrongfully charged with raping white women—such as the defendants in the 1931 Alabama trial known popularly as the Scottsboro case—instead of focusing on the experience of white women who were victims of interracial rape.

Edwards’s pamphlet launches a frontal attack on Brownmiller’s book, accusing it of capitulation to a racist, law-and-order mentality that did nothing to advance the legitimate cause of feminism. After painting a picture of rising crime amidst the general economic crisis of the mid-seventies, Edwards argues that “to focus on the increase in rape, particularly black on white rape, in isolation from the entire pattern and its causes, can only contribute to the repression and terror against black people.”

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41 Ibid., 254.


43 Edwards, 8.
terribly dangerous,” Edwards goes on to criticize “her inevitable law-and-order conclusions on how to stop rape.”

Thus, maintains Edwards, “A solution to rape that calls for more prosecutions is a solution that is designed to put more black men in jail, whether or not they have committed any crimes.”

Against Our Will suggests that female parity in police employment would be the “ultimate testing ground” for “full equality for women,” leading Edwards to sarcastically question whether women should also demand the right “to plot 50% of the assassinations of leaders of third world countries engaged in struggles for national liberation.”

From a revolutionary perspective, Brownmiller’s analysis was anathema.

For Edwards, the critique of Brownmiller becomes a launching pad for criticizing the rightward (and whiteward) trajectory of the women’s movement during the seventies. Combining STO’s traditional emphasis on the struggle against white supremacy with an immanent critique of feminism’s prospects, Edwards argues that “a women’s movement without black women will not free itself of bourgeois domination and become a revolutionary movement. In fact, a white women’s movement that does not align itself with black women’s struggle for liberation cannot be considered a women’s movement at all.”

Drawing on the historical parallel of how the women’s movement of the nineteenth century responded to black leadership in the movement for the abolition of slavery before the Civil War, Edwards suggests a framework that would allow white feminists to link their efforts to those of black communities for freedom and self-determination. She summarizes the importance and potential of a truly radical feminist movement:

A proletarian revolution is an absolute necessity for the liberation of women. Conversely, an autonomous women’s movement is an absolute necessity as part of a strategy for proletarian revolution. Without an independent women’s movement, there is no guarantee that the male supremacy now rampant in bourgeois society or, for that matter, within the proletarian movement or in any party, will be challenged. Thus, without a women’s movement there is no assurance that even under socialism the ideological superstructure of male dominance and male superiority will be

44 Ibid., 21.
46 Brownmiller, 388; Edwards, 25.
47 Edwards, 30.
undercut. Furthermore, without a revolutionary struggle against male supremacy, the fight against capitalist domination will not succeed.\textsuperscript{48}

With this emphatic statement, Edwards pre-empted any charge that she was marginalizing or rejecting the role of feminism. The point was reinforced by the back cover of the pamphlet, which featured a portrait of STO’s namesake, Sojourner Truth, alongside the long version of what is probably her most famous quote, ending in the rhetorical question “And ain’t I a woman?”\textsuperscript{49} In the context of Edwards’s polemic, this question took on a second meaning in direct challenge to the “white women’s movement” of the pamphlet’s title.

* * *

Edwards was for a long period STO’s leading theorist on women’s issues, and she remembers being groomed within the group as a female intellectual. When Brownmiller’s book was published, Ken Lawrence suggested to Edwards that she write a critique of it.\textsuperscript{50} Having completed this task, she later wrote a lengthy two-part essay published in \textit{Urgent Tasks}, entitled “Women and Modern Capitalism” that methodically laid out her analysis of patriarchy, and throughout this period she was involved in a range of political activities as part of STO and as a lawyer.\textsuperscript{51} But Edwards was hardly the only member of STO to address women’s issues during this time, either in writing or in practice. Carole Travis, Linda Phelps, Beth Henson, Elaine Zeskind, and Cathy Adolphson all published pieces about women’s oppression and liberation in the pages of \textit{Urgent Tasks}. Members of STO took on significant roles in campaigns against forced sterilization (especially in the Puerto Rican context), in defense of reproductive rights more broadly, and in support of Dessie

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 35.
\item \textsuperscript{49} More recent historical scholarship has disputed whether Truth actually uttered the words “ain’t I a woman.” See Carleton Mabee with Susan Mabee Newhouse, \textit{Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend} (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 75–78.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Allison Edwards, interview with the author, December 13, 2008.
\item \textsuperscript{51} See “Women and Modern Capitalism Part One: Erosion of Material Base for Oppression,” in \textit{Urgent Tasks} #5, Summer 1979, 6–19, and “Women and Modern Capitalism Part Two: Alienation and Objectification,” in \textit{Urgent Tasks} #6, Fall 1979, 13–34.
\end{itemize}
Woods, a black woman sentenced to death for killing a white man who tried to rape her. Women were in leadership positions within STO from its inception until its eventual demise. During the second half of the seventies a series of intra-organizational bodies, with names like “Women’s Commission” and “Women’s Wing” played an active role within the group’s internal culture.

Over the course of several years, an extensive internal debate focused STO’s attention on the question of women’s autonomy, both within the organization and outside it. An article by Elaine Zeskind on “The Party and Autonomy for Women” was featured prominently in the first issue of *Urgent Tasks*, prefaced by a note indicating that “STO intends to break with [the] traditional model” used by most New Communist groups, which rejected substantial autonomy for women because it was supposedly “an anti-Leninist capitulation to ‘petty bourgeois women’s caucus ideas.’” The extent to which the group did in fact distinguish itself from the “traditional model” is unclear, and no published documents ever followed up on the promise that prefaced Zeskind’s article. Similarly, there was little unanimity within STO on the questions related to the nature of male supremacy, the relationship of patriarchy to capitalism, or the role of women in revolutionary struggles. No theses were ever adopted by the organization providing an official stance on any of these topics, nor did any of the unsigned editorials in *UT* address such issues. Partly as a result, outsiders were left to piece together an understanding of STO’s perspective based either on their reading of STO’s published materials (all signed by individuals rather than organizationally) or on individual conversations with members of the group.

Ted Allen, who had helped pioneer the analysis of white skin privilege that had always defined STO, was one such outsider, and he produced a strikingly perceptive critique of what appeared to be STO’s overall position on women and revolution. In the summer of 1978, Allen sent a lengthy and often humorous letter to Noel Ignatin, his long-time comrade and friend, which, among other topics, addressed women’s oppression. “I understand you to say,” writes Allen, “that the oppression of women by men is not a revolutionary question because the women lack

52 Information on these activities comes from author interviews with Allison Edwards, Carole Travis, Carol Hayse, and Marcia LaRose, as well as various Internal Discussion Bulletins throughout the late seventies.

the power to make a successful revolution to get rid of male supremacy.”

“To give your argument its full justice,” he continues, “you would, I presume, say that women of the oppressed classes and nations can free themselves as members of social classes and nations, but not as women; that women cannot by their own independent strength throw off male domination.” Further speculating on the logic of the presumed Ignatin/STO position, Allen posits that such a stance required a belief that women’s liberation would come, not through an autonomous feminist struggle, but instead as an “incidental function” of successful anticapitalist and anti-imperialist revolutions.

Rejecting the “invidious comparison” between women and the working class as potential agents of revolution, Allen argues in favor of the proposition that women’s oppression was indeed an essential, if not necessarily “independent” revolutionary question. Questioning the value of “independence” as an evaluative benchmark for revolutionary struggle, he suggests that both proletarian and feminist struggles are likely to become “dependent” on each other in important ways as they develop. “I have never been in a revolution,” Allen concedes, “but from what I have heard, there comes a time when the people on both sides are less worried about ‘independently winning’ than they are about rounding up all the help they can round up to keep from getting their ass whipped.”

Allen even invoked the key point of unity he shared with Ignatin and all of STO, suggesting that the group’s emphasis on “independently winning” had the effect of “hindering the struggle against white supremacy.” This must have hit close to home for a group so strongly and publicly tied to the white skin privilege analysis.

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54 Letter from Ted Allen to Noel Ignatin, 11 July 1978, 19. Reproduced in *Internal Discussion Bulletin* #4, September 1978. In author’s possession. It appears that “you” here refers to STO organizationally, not merely to Ignatin alone. On page 23, Allen offers the following formulation for the contrasting positions: “I am not so ready as STO seems to be to talk about the proletariat being able to fulfill its [sic] revolutionary task independently, while the women’s struggle is helpless to make a revolution on its own.”

55 Ibid., 20.

56 The line about “incidental function” comes from Ibid., 21.

57 Ibid., 23.

58 Ibid. Emphasis in original.

59 Ibid.
Allen also addresses the “incidental function” argument, offering a tentative assessment of the link between women’s liberation and the reality of socialist revolution in the twentieth century. Since Ignatin was clearly aligned with the state capitalist position on the Soviet Union and other so-called socialist countries, Allen assumed STO would argue that the lack of full women’s liberation in these countries was a result of the failure of their revolutions, and “that when the proletariat succeeds in its revolution, the progress of women to full equality with men will follow in consequence.”

He counters with a probing question: “But have you ever thought of considering whether or not, and if so to what extent, the failure of the revolutionary parties to carry forward with the complete equalizing of women may have been, not just a result, but a cause of the failure of socialist revolutions?”

Finally, Allen deals at length with a position that he ascribes to “some members of STO:” “that the oppression of women is not a revolutionary question because it can be solved under capitalism.” Challenging this analysis as incompatible with Marxist economic analysis, he argues that strict limits existed on the ability of women to be fully incorporated into capitalist production on an equal basis with men. “Far short of the point at which women’s liberation through employment as wage laborers could produce a social parity of the sexes, the trend is overtaken and reversed by the economics of the increasing cost of their general employment.”

At the same time, Allen points to the problem of “male ego and its ideology” as “a major barrier to the development of revolutionary consciousness among men everywhere.” In this regard, he suggests the need for a study of male supremacy that would parallel the research done by W.E.B. Du Bois on “the relationship between white supremacy and bourgeois rule in this country.” Once again, Allen’s deliberate reference to the shared commitment to struggling against white supremacy served to highlight the potential he ascribed to the fight against male supremacy.

The response from STO was muted. No official reply was forthcoming, either from the organization as a whole or from its Women’s Commission.

60 Ibid., 22.
61 Ibid. Allen followed with amusing self-deprecation—“Well, neither have I”—and allowed that “probably work along that line is already well advanced by women researchers and theorists of whose thinking I am in typical male ignorance.” Ibid., 23.
62 Ibid., 27.
63 Ibid., 28.
64 Ibid.
In a subsequent discussion in the Chicago Branch, Ignatin clarified that the position he expressed to Allen prior to Allen’s letter was “that women, as women by themselves, are incapable of making a social revolution, and thus are not ‘independently revolutionary,’ but certainly are capable of throwing off male domination.”65 But this begged the question of whether the “throwing off” could happen within capitalism or only as part of a broader revolution. If the former, then Allen’s critique of the position held by “some members” of STO would still apply to the extent that limits existed on the ability of capitalism to accommodate women’s liberation; if the latter, then Allen’s rejection of the need for “independence” remained valid. Regardless, it is not clear that STO was particularly concerned to critically evaluate its own positions in light of Allen’s critique. Perhaps the clearest attempt at some sort of response came in the form of Edwards’ long, two-part article on “Women and Modern Capitalism.”

Edwards never mentions Allen directly, but she seems to have his critique in mind when she tackles the question of capitalism’s relationship to male supremacy. Drawing on the classic Marxist distinction between base and superstructure, which Allen himself had also highlighted in his letter to Ignatin, Edwards argues that the “material base” of women’s oppression had been “eroded” by the development of capitalism in the twentieth century. In other words, previously important factors like the unwaged labor of women in the home and the accessibility of women as what Marx called a “reserve army of labor” that keeps all wages depressed, have increasingly been undermined by dramatic technological and socio-political transformations in capitalism. However, while the economic base could be reconciled to a situation in which women have substantial equality with men, there still remains the problem of the superstructure, where “male supremacy has taken on a life of its own and continues to exist as an ideology with substantial privileges and benefits (both material and nonmaterial) to men, in spite of its diminishing benefit to capitalism.”66 In a new twist on the question of being “independently revolutionary,” Edwards argues that “only in a period of major social upheaval” could “entrenched ideas” like the ideology of male supremacy

65 This quote is from the “Chicago Branch Report: November, 1978 Discussion on Women Question,” prepared by Ed Voci in April 1979, and based in part on “the recollection of” Ignatin and several others. IDB #10, May 1979, 11.

be “open to significant challenge and change.” But Edwards repudiates Allen’s charge of women’s liberation being an “incidental function” of socialist revolution. Without speculating on the proper forms of women’s autonomy within revolutionary organizations, she states flatly that “an autonomous women’s movement is essential for that decisive challenge to male supremacy.” The end result of Edwards’ piece is a coherent, if unacknowledged, response to Ted Allen.

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Parallel to the question of women’s autonomy, of course, was the question of the autonomy of people, organizations, and movements of color. Internally, the role of third world revolutionaries as members of STO came to a head a year and a half after the Coe Conference created the framework for their participation. In the intervening time, a handful of STO publications had addressed the issue. Hamerquist’s lengthy pamphlet, *White Supremacy and the Afro-American National Question*, directly addressed the question of membership of color in groups like STO, acknowledging that the group’s chosen approach, in prioritizing the health of third world movements and organizations, “creates many problems and runs counter to a normal concern for organizational viability.” “Who’s Being Dogmatic? A Response to the Philadelphia Workers’ Organizing Committee on the National Question” by Jasper Collins, published in the second issue of *Urgent Tasks*, highlighted the need for autonomy within multinational revolutionary groups via a close reading of Lenin’s response to the Jewish Bund. Collins went so far as to suggest that “it is necessary for the revolutionary party to provide a great deal more autonomy for Third World members than Lenin proposed for the national parties in 1906.” While these initial attempts to theorize

67 Ibid., 7.

68 Ibid.


70 Jasper Collins, “Who’s Being Dogmatic? A Response to the Philadelphia Workers’ Organizing Committee on the National Question,” in *Urgent Tasks* #2, October 1977, 54. As described in Chapter Six, Collins was a pseudonym for Ken Lawrence. STO’s unique interpretation of the Bund is assessed in more detail in Chapter Eight. For more background on the Bund, from a variety of perspectives, see the anthology *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern*
the issue were important, they could not prepare STO for the actually impending challenge to its own “organizational viability.”

In the fall of 1977, discussions emerged within STO around the proper framework for “third world” autonomy inside the group. Primarily, the question concerned the ability of members of color to determine or direct organizational activities that related to “their” communities and movements. The members of color and a core of supportive white members proposed that “the Third World Caucus would have autonomy after sufficient debate. This does not entail a bridling of the work of white cadre, but rather an overseeing of their work.”\(^71\) The response from the elected (and all white) leadership of STO was that this proposal would undermine the democratic principle of majority rule, to the extent that an unelected group (the Third World Caucus) could potentially overrule official decisions made either by the elected National Committee or even those made by the assembled majority of the membership at a General Membership Meeting. As a result, Ken Lawrence advocated for “moral rather than formal” authority for the Caucus in such situations: “My position at the present time is that in most instances, after a full discussion and debate, the organization ought to defer to the wishes of the Third World members—but I would not like to make this automatic.”\(^72\)

An intense debate on this question at the December 1977 GMM was variously characterized as “legitimately sharp,” as “hard-hitting,” or as having been “dominated by white chauvinism.” The Third World Caucus and its supporters argued that “in its style, its tone and some of its implications,” the debate showed a level of disrespect toward the members of color. The contradiction on the question of membership in STO implicit in the Coe Resolution had finally become concrete: in the eyes of the Caucus and its supporters, the leadership of STO believed in following the leadership of revolutionaries of color only when they functioned in separate organizations, not when they shared the same organizational space inside STO. The leadership responded that the real problem was a form of white liberalism, such that a certain percentage of STO’s white membership uncritically accepted the unreasonable

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\(^71\) “The Reasons for the Split in STO,” 3. The phrase is a quote from “point B.” of “a brief set of proposals” put forward by the Third World Caucus in advance of the General Membership Meeting in December 1977. I have not located a copy of the original set of proposals.

\(^72\) Quoted in Ibid., 5.
positions of the Third World Caucus when a more objective assessment of the situation would place priority on the health of the revolutionary movements within the oppressed nations. Formal proceedings were initiated to censure much of the elected leadership of STO for racist conduct during the debate, and after more intense discussion the votes on the motions were a mixed bag: one person was censured (though it is unclear what penalty, if any, resulted), the vote on another person ended in a tie, and two more individuals were not censured.\(^{73}\)

Despite this tension, the GMM was able to unanimously approve a provisional formulation of how autonomy for members of color should function internally: “Any time the TW caucus feels that the work of the organization is mistaken it has the responsibility to call a halt to that work and for an emergency meeting of the appropriate body which could resolve the differences. Prior to that meeting the decisions of the TW caucus would prevail. After debate within the body the TW caucus would decide tactics; the organization, strategy.”\(^{74}\) A decision was also made to “add members of the TW caucus, selected by the caucus, to all leading bodies of the organization.”\(^{75}\) It is possible that this compromise solution would have merely shifted the conflict to a question of definitions—what is the dividing line between strategy and tactics, and which “appropriate body” gets to decide?—but the policy itself was never implemented. Relations between the two factions continued to sour: the Third World Caucus and its supporters felt attacked and disrespected, while the leadership continued to reject any accusations of racist behavior on its part. Given the importance STO placed on anti-imperialist solidarity work, it was inevitable that the dispute would spill over to the various national liberation movements with which STO worked, and from whom the leadership sought advice. A key part of the Coe Resolution had insisted that “every care must be exercised to insure that multinational communist groups do not function in a way that raises barriers between Third World revolutionaries and their organizations and Third World cadre in multinational organizations.”\(^{76}\) But since the Third World Caucus members had made deliberate decisions to join STO and not to join any of the nationalist groups in their own communities, the Caucus and its supporters resented efforts by STO’s leadership to bring

73 For more on STO’s approach to internal discipline, see Chapter Six.
75 Ibid., 8.
76 “Third World Revolutionary Organizations and the Party Building Process.” In author’s possession.
in these very organizations as mediating forces. The Caucus accused the leadership of trying to poison the well with groups like the Afrikan People’s Party and the Republic of New Afrika by explaining to them only one side of the dispute.

The approved resolution on autonomy also did little to address ongoing concerns within STO regarding informal hierarchy. When the leadership opposed the original autonomy proposal because the members of the Third World Caucus were not democratically elected, the Caucus and its supporters retorted that several people universally regarded as leading members of STO were not then serving in elected offices themselves. Four prominent members—Hamerquist, Ignatin, Lawrence, and Travis—had been members of (or in Lawrence’s case, affiliated with) STO since its inception almost a decade earlier, and all had extensive background in the “old left” going back either to childhood or adolescence. As David Ranney argued at the time, in the eyes of some younger members, “the major basis for leadership and power in STO is tradition and experience in the old left (CP, POC) along with the presumption that this tradition and experience makes those who have it superior in matters of estimate. Those who occupy both formal and informal leadership positions on this basis believe themselves to be inherently and forever superior to others and, therefore, can never really give up the prerogatives of power to others.”

This amounted to a critique of STO’s organizational practice and its failure to live up to the unorthodox vision of democratic centralism formally embraced at the Coe Conference. One aspect of this critique was especially important to the Caucus: these prominent people inside STO had over the years developed personal relationships with leading members of various national liberation organizations, which gave them a specific base of power that was unrelated to any elective offices they might have held.

Nearly three decades later, Ranney could still maintain that among the leading members of STO “there was a profound impact of the CP on the organization that wasn’t completely recognized, even by the people themselves. They had definitely made a break from Stalinism in a very profound way, but they were all kind of raised in a political culture,

however, where certain things were very controlled, and they never completely let go of it…. There was a tendency of the informal leadership to circle the wagons and direct things.”\textsuperscript{78} This interpretation appears to have been a minority position within STO at the time, since in the aftermath of the conflict over autonomy, Hamerquist, Ignatin, Lawrence, and Travis were all elected to the National Committee.\textsuperscript{79} Regardless, it was one of several sources of frustration for the Caucus and its supporters.

Another issue in the dispute was even less obvious, because it had nothing to do with questions of autonomy. Several of the most vocal supporters of the Caucus (and at least one member of the Caucus itself) were still working and organizing in factories, despite STO’s decision a year and a half earlier to de-emphasize political work at the point of production. Many of the other supporters, and all members of the Caucus, were heavily involved in mass organizing work of various sorts. In this context, STO’s decision at Coe to focus on “party-building” efforts, and its subsequent emphasis on developing formal relationships with other revolutionary organizations as part of those efforts, effectively alienated the members of the Caucus and many of its supporters. At the time, Ranney was working and organizing in a small factory on the south side of Chicago that produced lard. In advocating a formal split from STO, he decried the group’s emphasis on maneuvering within the left in lieu of mass work, and suggested that “with our [STO’s] priority on party-building we tend in practice to evaluate our work in terms of what puts STO in a better position to strengthen our tendency within the white left.”\textsuperscript{80} The organizing work many members were pursuing in industrial settings did not fit well in this new framework, especially since STO had begun to define itself in relation to other anti-imperialist groups like Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, as opposed to New Communist groups, like the October League, that continued to focus on point-of-production work. The organizational estimate regarding the “lull” further marginalized the position of factory workers and in-plant organizers like Ranney. These issues were raised in only the most oblique fashion in the surviving documents related to the split, and yet several of the people who left STO in 1978 recall their commitment to factory organizing as having been a subtext in the process.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{78} David Ranney, interview with the author, December 20, 2005.
\textsuperscript{79} “The Reasons for the Split in STO,” 11.
\textsuperscript{80} David Ranney, “Position on Splitting STO” (January 9, 1978), 5. In author’s possession.
\textsuperscript{81} Author interviews with Dave Ranney, John Strucker, and Jim Carrillo,
The final result was perhaps predictable: thirteen members of STO, including all four members of color, left the organization early in 1978. In the aftermath, some half-hearted efforts were made at reconciliation and at re-merging the organization, but the frustrations on both sides were too severe to be overcome immediately. Most of those who left formed a short-lived organization called the Midwest Action League (MAL), which for a year or so was involved in largely the same set of anti-imperialist solidarity efforts as STO, even as its membership remained committed to factory organizing. As late as January, 1979, both groups were credited, alongside Prairie Fire and others, with having helped publish a collection of communiqués from the Puerto Rican independence movement. Several members of MAL were also involved in a range of workplace struggles, often coordinated through the Workers’ Rights Center that their faction had inherited in the split from STO. This work led to the publication of the unsigned pamphlet ‘There Ain’t No Justice … Just Us: An Account of a Wildcat Strike. Written by Ranney, it was a passionate first-person narrative of a struggle against management and the corrupt union at the small factory where he worked, as well as a reflection on long-standing topics of concern for the former member of STO, such as white supremacy, revolutionary organization, and industrial legality. The wildcat strike was largely unsuccessful, and many of the strikers lost their jobs, but the unity inspired by the struggle was still powerful.

In many ways, this represented a return to the sorts of work that had characterized the earlier era of STO’s existence, before the Coe Conference declaration of the “lull.” But the return was short-lived: deindustrialization and harassment by plant management meant that Ranney himself had a hard time finding factory work after being fired; he eventually returned to his previous career as an economics professor. MAL all of whom left in the split, support this assessment. Don Hamerquist agreed with this broad outline, while noting that several people still working in factories did not leave in the split.


83 ‘There Ain’t No Justice … Just Us: An Account of a Wildcat Strike (Chicago: South Chicago Workers’ Rights Center, 1978). Photographs taken by Ranney and others during the strike, some of which were featured in the pamphlet, are included on the front cover of this book.
didn’t fare any better; the group was defunct perhaps a year after its founding, and the former members scattered both politically and geographically. STO continued on and even grew substantially, as will be seen, but in its remaining decade of existence it included very few if any members of color.