Defining Practice

the Intermediate Level of Organization and Struggle

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There is a left tradition of thinking about and taking action within two realms of activity: the mass level and the revolutionary political level. There are different ways to cash out these concepts, but they are distinguished basically by levels of unity and content. The mass level is where people come together based on common interests to take action in some form, with unions being the most obvious and traditional example. A higher level of unity is the revolutionary political level where people take action based on common ideas and practices. These concepts are tools or instruments that can help us make sense of the world, and better act to change it. In so far as they do that, they work. If they don't, we get new ones. At the level of reality, this division is not so clear and in fact we see mixtures of unity and action everywhere. That being said, these concepts help us parse out how as revolutionaries we can relate to social groupings, and how we can intervene.

There is an additional level though that can help us in this manner, the intermediate level. As opposed to the political level, which is defined by attempted unity of ideas, and the mass level, which is defined by common practices with diversity of ideas, the intermediate level shares some features of both. The intermediate level is where people organize based on some basic level of unity of ideas to develop and coordinate their activity at the mass level.

Taking the example of the workers movement, we see unions at the mass level grouped together by common workplace issues, and a political level of revolutionary militants with unified ideology acting within the unions in some way or another. Within the unions there can be a plurality of political organizations, and even of individual militants who lack organizations. An intermediate level organization could come to unite class conscious workers around a strategy within their industry, workplace, etc. The intermediate level organization would not have the unity of a political organization, since its basis is bringing together militants for a common practice that doesn't require everyone having the same ideology and political program. Likewise, if we required every member in a mass organization to share a high level of class consciousness and militancy (independently of the ebb and flow of struggles), we would be doomed either to fractions or paper tigers.

There is also a distinction between levels and organizations. That is there's a mass level before the mass organization. The mass organization is made up of people who come together around common interests. That means there are people with common interests who exist before they come together in the mass organization. Often there is mass level activity and organizing (like spontaneous struggles, informal work groups, etc), before there is mass organization. There's also a revolutionary (or at least leftist) level before the revolutionary organization – there are people with ideas and actions who exist before they come together into a conscious revolutionary body.

Likewise with the intermediate level, there are individuals and activities that precede organization. Presently there are organizations that sometimes play the role of intermediate organization (unconsciously), and there is prefigurative organizing and tendencies of potential future intermediate organizations. I want to hazard a thesis; in the United States today the intermediate level is the most important site for revolutionaries. In fact, I think this is true beyond the United States, but I lack the space here to prove it, and will leave it up to others in other places.

The intermediate level is strategic at this time is due to the state of political and mass organizations. The revolutionary left has been isolated from the working class (as well as other oppressed classes) for at least decades. The left is largely derived from the student and sub-cultural movements which serve as a training ground for the various institutional left bureaucracies (NGOs, unions, lobbying groups, political parties, sections of academia, etc), or at the least these institu-

tions remain dominant within the left. The left reflects a particular section of society, one that sets it apart from the working class in its activity, vision, and makeup. There's an inertia of dyspraxia; the ideas the left espouses do not reflect the activity of the left. Whether this is from the black block to the so-revolutionaries working to elect the left wing of capital, the left is characterized at this time by an alienation from the working class rather than an ability to "act in its interest".

On the other side the mass movements are dominated by those same forces that the left breeds in, the institutionalized bureaucracies which are integrated into capitalism. Few if any mass movements exist where the working class has collective engagement and leadership, and bring collective activity to bare down on capital. The mass movements alone don't have any guarantees. Workers have their own ideas and logic, some of which can be liberatory and others of which can be reactionary (and everything in between). Both spontaneity and vanguardism are fundamentally flawed ways of looking at the world. While the mass movements ultimately have the power to transform society, the opposite may be true as well (they can become reactionary defenders of capitalism, or worse put forward reactionary radical politics). Nor is the left is immune from all same forces that threaten the mass movements, in fact the official or institutional left's track record is worse. Generally the left has been behind the masses in times of upheaval, and often in the role of repressing these movements.

Nature, Transformation, and Struggle

Historically, there's a syllogism on the libertarian left about unions that reflects the division between the mass and political levels. The syllogism is some variant of this:

1. A union is organized by people to improve working conditions
2. In order for it to make good on their demands, the unions have to bring together large enough groups to be effective.
3. If workers must be anarchists/revolutionaries/communists before they join then either:

a. It would be unnecessary since the workers are already revolutionary, and could just launch a revolution. The union would just be a duplicate of a political organization. (or)
b. The members would merely be anarchists/revolutionaries/communists on paper.

Another variant:

1. Trade unions exist to win better working conditions
2. An organized working class creates antagonism with a better funded and organized capitalists class
3. Either trade unions:
    a. Retain their militancy, and are attacked without restraint
        i. Thereby rendering them less/ineffective at winning gains
    b. Or they can attempt class collaboration, and (sometimes) wins ground

i. This integrates unions into capitalism, and creates a union bureaucracy with interests separated from the workers

ii. The union has an interest in maintaining capitalism, and therefore becomes reactionary.

The conclusions of these lines of thought vary, but they share some things in common. This orientation puts forward an ahistorical and overly schematic conception of the mass and political level. The implications of these theories are that either this is how things are or how they should be. The conclusion is that we should either try to convince mass movements to avoid politicization or that we should recognize their inability to do so and diverge from them. The upshot of this these lines of thought tend to orient us towards the mass and political level in ways that make us unprepared for the ways in which movements change across time and constitute themselves.

The history of the workers movement is quite different from the arguments above. Rather than seeing very clear cut divisions either between revolutionary political organizations and very general mass unions (or between collaborationist and militant unions), we see every possible permutation. That is to be expected, however the above arguments try to argue against mixing mass and political, saying it's a witches brew that will yield only failure. It's an argument about the nature or essence of mass and political, which then tries to change real mass organizations and political organizations in relation to their supposed nature.

The problem is that these organizations are not static, they change. They also do not change on a whim, but there are distinct ebbs and flows of struggle. When the struggle is pitched and society (or at least some section of it) erupts into resistance, we can see mass organizations become politicized, and workers can be radicalized (or become radicalized towards fascistic tendencies). Likewise political organization can take on mass characteristics. In low points of struggle however politicized workers organization have a difficult time acting as a mass organization (though they try!), and mass organizations can tend towards domination by class collaborationism and bureaucratic parasitism.

While too general to say anything systematic, this is a fundamental insight. The nature of struggle is not static, but changes with the rise and fall of resistance. Now, this doesn't negate that you can see militant radical mass movements in times when other struggles are absent (perhaps the MST in Brazil during some periods is a good example, or the underground CNT under Franco), but we should expect that the scope of these struggles will be limited, and that we need another orientation other than expecting them to grow step-by-step linearly. How people organize themselves changes alongside this. That being said, I will mention only in passing that I don't think either the mass organization alone or the political organization are sufficient to bring down capitalism and create a new society. Both the experiences of party dictatorship in the soviet states, and the failures of syndicalism in Spain and elsewhere provide some data about the limitations of rigidly adhering to organizational forms as vehicles of liberation.

Struggle itself can be transformative, both of people and of levels and organizations. People at the mass level come together in organization to fight, and can transform their consciousness through those struggles. The mass organization itself may change then, and intermediate and political organizations may evolve from those struggles. The political level may build mass organization, or intermediate organization consolidates into political organization. Ultimately the

mass level is the lifeblood of all struggles. Without the mass level, the intermediate and political levels are merely chasing winds. If we recognize this dynamic, that people are transformed in struggle and organizations can be built through these transformations, it helps rupture these rigid conceptions of the separations of the political and mass organization, the dominance of the political organization, or fetishized forms of the mass revolutionary organization.

In our time, the alienation of the left from struggle has created a kind of abstract obsession with either structures or ideas. An intellectual and often political sect driven tendency focuses solely on political content, in terms of trying to convince, debate, win, or propagate revolutionary ideas irrespective of the form they take, their embodiment in struggle, etc. An activist tendency tends towards an obsession with form and structure (assemblies, councils, unions, etc), and usually merely formal democracy, as being inherently revolutionary irrespective of the content and ideas of the people inside the structure, or even its direction. The content of struggles is however crucial. Formal democracy with a racist working class could yield a radical democratic fascism for example. We want to see a lived democracy, which can't be guaranteed by structures alone, and ultimately we need a democracy with a certain content, anarchist communist content. This means we should seek out and strengthen struggles that develop that content in the struggle, which is different from getting people to verbalize radical ideas.

Synthesizing these two features of organization in society brings into focus the role of the intermediate level. At the present time, we live in a low point of struggle in the United States. Today mass organization is either spread out and localized, repressed, or co-opted. Political organization is generally isolated and deformed, while capital is unleashing massive restructuring, discipline, and rationalization. The two options usually presented have been to unreflectively build mass movements, or to build political organizations (sometimes to build them alongside or within the mass movements). At the level of mass struggle, it's worth saying that organizing is incredibly difficult, and the strength and repression of capital alone is the greatest threat. However the potential of capital to incorporate and utilize repressive measures on struggle through the mass movements is poorly understood and unappreciated on the left (especially since the level of struggle is low anyhow). On the revolutionary political side we have isolation manifested in its spontaneist, insurrectionary, or intellectual forms. More secondarily there are attempts to build political organization out of the mass movements which generally don't exist or are organized against political organization. It becomes a chicken or the egg sort of game, we lack the struggle to rupture the stasis of the mass movements, but we lack the mass movements to generate the struggle. It is not possible to will into existence militant class conscious mass movements, nor is it responsible to sit on one's hands waiting for it to occur.

During low points of struggle then, the intermediate level presents an alternative. While we may not be able to sustain radical mass organization at all times, we can bring together the most conscious elements of the mass movements together with the most active and grounded elements of the revolutionary movements to provide continuity, organization, coordination, and education between struggles. The intermediate level organization then is the memory, training ground, and nursery of developing consciousness in struggle, which is not possible within the ebb and flows with the mass movements, and which has different activity and unity from the political level. Unlike the mass movements, the intermediate level does not seek to become the vehicle for mediation between capital and the working class, and because of this it has space for activity and development that the mass movement can not. That said, in practice the intermediate level should arise from and remain directly bound to the mass level. The intermediate level gets

its vitality and strength from the lessons, challenges, and strength of the struggle, and maintains its unity through that fight. Abstract coalitions of self-identified leftists wanting to do things at the mass level is a recipe for dead end reading groups more than anything else.

The Intermediate Level already exists in struggle

Concretely this alternative already presents itself in practice for those who are organizing. For example take struggles within the unions for greater militancy and democracy. Often these struggles take the form of union elections, coordinated activity in union meetings, and sometimes actions. For the workers organizing these actions (whatever their merits), there are a number of challenges to overcome. First there is the space to hold meetings where strategy and tactics can be discussed, assessments of the organizing, and also space to bring contacts for one-on-one discussions, or even larger mass meetings. While this is true of physical space, it is also true in terms of skills, abilities, and materials. Workers need some level of pooling of resources to train each other, maintain systematic organization, pass on lessons of struggle, and develop their vision of direction. This requires a level of organization that the boss will be hostile to, and the union being challenged is also likely to oppose. There are other points to consider. If the group wins the struggle, often the organization leading up to the fight is incorporated into the existing bureaucracy, dissolves itself, or is attacked. Yet all the same problems resurface down the line as the winds change, and the rank and file find themselves embattled again. The intermediate level organization is that space that allows militants the coordination, resources, education, and continuity to provide ongoing resistance and the development of new militants across these ups and downs.

Given the marginality of unions in the US at this point, a more general experience in the workplace is with a non-unionized environment, especially a precarious one. Three examples from the current IWW illuminate the potential of the intermediate level organization. While somewhat arbitrary I use these examples, because I was involved in all of them so am able to bring forward these reflections with more intimacy, and they provide symmetrical analogies and contradictions.

In the restaurant industry there is a high level of turnover, and generally speaking precarious work. Benefits are non-existent, loyalty to particular shops fairly low, and staff is dependent on tips for basic income while often divided amongst themselves. In a variety of contexts the IWW organized in the restaurant sector. Most shops are in units of less than 20 workers, which are not financially sustainable for any traditional union (run by paid staff) to organize contracts in. It is extremely unlikely that a union would be able to leverage enough power to win a contract, sustain membership and activity needed to maintain the contract, and keep a union in anything but name under these conditions. Consequently a strategy developed in some local branches of the IWW organizing in restaurants and food service. The organizing was oriented to fighting around particular grievances using direct action, and generally through clandestine organizing without the boss knowing a union is involved. A number of successes arose from this approach, in contrast to experiments with rank and file contract-based approaches in small shops. The trajectory of this organizing however was limited. Hot shops produced one or two politicized leaders, but once the grievance passed the shop cooled, and business went back to normal. Often workers would quit anyway, and the leadership did too on a number of occasions. Where the

union could recruit and develop the leadership, and convince them to carry the struggle to other shops, the beginning of an industrial network of militants developed. In one city this developed into a permanent organization outside the IWW, though organized with IWW militants, and won a number of successes, integrating more workers into their organization as militants. The IWW in this case began to shift from being a mass organization proper, to being an intermediate organization of class conscious revolutionary militants building a tendency within an industry, and eventually even a separate mass organization while retaining its autonomy. The intermediate organization grew out of mass level struggles and organization, and eventually reproduced mass level organization.

During the early 2000s the IWW in Portland had a series of victories in non-profit social service shops, ultimately winning contracts for a hand full of workers in small shops. While the shops remained organized in name, the social service industrial union branch that was built out of these shops swelled with unorganized social workers. Effectively the industrial union began to function as a network of social service worker militants rather than a representative body of employees (except for the handful of workers under contract). Membership peaked at around 200 for a period. With the strategy oriented primarily towards gaining contracts in small shops in an era of budget cuts, the project was to fail. However, during the peak one of the contract shops was threatened with a massive budget cut by the county, threatening the services provided and the workers deeply. Because this industrial network existed, the industrial union branch was able to organize a section of the social service industry to take action at county budget hearings. The hearing was picketed, and the county backed down. Social service workers from across the industry uniting for a public display of the contradictions of capital in it's mangled approach to trying to serve society. This was press that the county was not in the mood to deal with. The county instantly restored full funding. While this was merely a transitory experience, it demonstrated an alternative to the contractual model of building unions. Ultimately the contract shop was not able to move beyond this activity as a defensive move, and expand their gains and reach, but it served as an example for organizers who participated and took the lessons of that struggle to a different approach. In this case the inability to see beyond the union building project was to be the death of the intermediate network, which otherwise may have been able to expand, clarify itself, and presented a rallying point and challenge to austerity and capitalism.

In the summer of 2004 wildcat strikes swept the ports of the US, bringing the transit of goods to a halt on a massive scale. The strikes were organized by a huge number of small groupings of truckers across the country, tenuously linked, and communicating via text, Nextel phones, community radio, and the internet. The workers were often hostile to the unions trying to organize them, due to bad blood over sweetheart deals for the employer and failed attempts decades earlier. The struggle was actually merely a particular intense flare up of similar fights happening over the 15+ years since the deunionization and deregulation of the ports, and the subsequent shifts in working conditions and class recomposition of the drivers. During that time, drivers had learned how to fight and win directly without intermediaries, and could for periods overcome interethnic competition to present a class-wide front for organization. The problem they faced was constantly that of coordination across the grouplets, sustaining the gains they made, and systematizing their often patched together organizing. The strike wave of 2004 was to fade away on account of these problems. At the time, a mass based militant organization was possible, though the foundation for that transition had not been laid. Both before and after the interme-

diate level organization could have served to build up to those fights, and sustain the victories through building the needed leadership, connections, and organization.

Exploring Alternatives

To conclude there are a few clear avenues I see open for the building of intermediate organization. I will borrow here from a recent Miami Autonomy and Solidarity organization strategy, and present that collective work as an addition to my individual arguments here. At its most general, our task is two-fold. Revolutionaries active in the mass level need to prioritize work that facilitates the radicalization of militants at the mass level. Miami Autonomy and Solidarity call this M-I (mass to intermediate). At the same time, though of lesser priority given the lower quality of the left, we need to work to engage revolutionaries at the mass level. Given the low level of activity at the mass level by revolutionaries this would be I-M. M-I and I-M gives us a broad perspective for our work with M-I as primary. These strategic priorities are those developed by MAS which I am drawing from and borrowing.

Within existing practice however the intermediate level shows promise with the potential for intermediate organization a close possibility. Within the workers movement, there's a libertarian tendency which could organize collectively to intervene as a force based on common practices irrespective of the site of struggle. This would require struggle, working out the strategy through practice, debate and even rupture with elements (especially those tied to the institutionalized workers movement) in the milieu, such an intermediate organization would be a potential force for presenting alternatives where the organization doesn't exist, and unions are unwilling. The massive budget cuts, layoffs, and austerity measures are glaring examples where the unions have so far generally chosen to lobby or collaborate, and new forms of struggles have not magically arisen.

The student movement has seen the rise of student-interests based organizing, which has the potential to become mass organization. At this point this work is largely driven by libertarian elements, and an intermediary classist organization could prepare the groundwork for these struggles. In the southern cone of South America similar libertarian or revolutionary student fronts exist presently. With huge cuts and people flooding into colleges to find respite from severe unemployment, a wide crisis is developing in education. There is potential likewise for this work to produce militants who can carry their lessons and organization onto their workplaces following graduation, assuming they don't integrate with capital.

Within housing and transit organizing likewise there is organizing (generally dominated by NGOs unfortunately) that has linked and developed militants with often libertarian methods. The fare strike movements and increasing militancy of transit workers, and the uncertain nature of transit costs, has created potentially explosive situations. The housing crisis and the relative success of direct action against capital has gained momentum and developed self-conscious militants. Intermediate organization could draw out and develop the anti-capitalist logic and tendencies within these struggles, and consolidate gains.

While this summary is too schematic and brief to serve as anything but a raw canvas (an analysis would require another article all together), it illuminates the direction struggle has already taken us, and the possibilities for activity if we are to take them.

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This article is about levels of organization, and a strategic thesis that the intermediate level is the strategic point of intervention for the libertarian left in our time. The intermediate level is where groupings of conscious workers unify around some basic unity for coordination and struggle in the mass organization.