

Revolutionary organisation in the 21st century: a proposal from the Steering Group

Concerns are regularly being raised about rs21's health as an organisation.

We feel it may be misplaced to diagnose "decline" in a grouping which has always been small and experimental, and which has undergone qualitative changes in its short 4-year lifespan; nonetheless, rs21's collective performance is clearly patchy at present in various areas, and plainly isn't inspiring members' universal enthusiasm.

Various observations have been put forward about this performance. For instance, it is sometimes said that rs21 is bereft of a clear direction and strategy; sometimes, that rs21 lacks a compelling overall analysis of the world; sometimes, that rs21's technical organising capacity (e.g. to advertise meetings or to recruit new members) is too limited to successfully maintain and expand a broad periphery.

These are all fair claims, at least some of the time, and in at least some respects. But as practical-minded socialists making the most of our limited energy and resources, we must try to identify the "weak link" – the particular priority which, if energetically addressed, has the greatest chance of steadying and bolstering the whole organisation.

This document represents the Steering Group's attempt to do that. We want to propose that the one thing rs21 most urgently needs to do is to develop healthy, robust and democratic channels for internal discussion of political questions (besides our 4-monthly National Meetings). We recommend that our paramount focus must be on building operative local branches – as well as regular meet-ups of smaller geographical clusters of comrades who haven't yet been able to set up a full branch – and that these, above all, are where members can conduct ongoing discussions, both about rs21's analysis of the world, and about its strategy, as well as building the capacity to intervene collectively in campaigns. Special measures should also be put in place to allow those members who are geographically isolated to find a regular group of comrades online with whom to engage.

In what follows we hope to briefly lay out a few of the minimal expectations of membership of rs21, establish a minimal consensus for organisation, and outline what we believe to be some of the most effective methods of developing structures of accountability. We propose these structures starting from the bottom up, at branch level, and in the interest of creating as democratic and involved an organisational culture as possible.

Why do we do revolutionary organising?

As long as the capitalist mode of production exists, no argument and no historical event can extinguish the fact of class struggle. It is a fact of everyday life, and it cuts through every aspect of our politics. Exploitation underpins our current society, and it is carried on by the ruling class through the state, its repressive and legal departments, and the sham of bourgeois democracy. From this there are several unavoidable conclusions:

Working-class politics is always 'against the state'.

The state is the single greatest instrument of ruling class struggle; it provides the ideological and legal justifications for exploitation through its educational institutions, its laws, and its 'democratic' rituals; it provides the force and violence to maintain the sanctity of bourgeois property through the police and army, and to realise the predatory interests of capital through imperialism. The state provides the means of overcoming the internal conflicts of the ruling class through its various committees and separations of powers. More than this, as long as capitalism orders society the state provides the ruling class with the ability to assimilate every victory of the working class, however great, to make it palatable to the interests of accumulation and exploitation. In the face of such violence and sophistication, workers have only the strength of their organisation and the guidance of their strategy, both of which depend on the clarity of analysis available to them. Bourgeois education and politics constantly work to undermine the organisation of the working class.

Reforms are always temporary

The question of 'reform or revolution' implies a false opposition; it suggests that we always have, in front of us, a simple choice between raising the standards of life under capitalism or abolishing the entire thing overnight. As revolutionaries we know that the class struggle represents the absolute antagonism between the working class and the ruling class, an antagonism which can only ultimately be resolved by revolution. Because of this, every 'reform' - however hard it is wrung from our exploiters - is reversible and fragile, and only ever represents an uneasy truce in the class struggle. The important question then, is not whether such reforms are 'good' because they raise the standards of living for workers or 'bad' because they perpetuate capitalism, but how to affect the balance of the class struggle, how to develop autonomous working class organisation, both to win reforms through struggle, and to preserve the strength of the labour movement against the state and the ruling class.

The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself

Only the working class has the power to radically transform society, since capitalist production relies fundamentally on its labour. No serious socialist organisation can aspire to stand in or substitute for the power of the working class, and any organisation which seeks to pursue a strategy of sectarian isolation, for the sake of political purity or organisational arrogance, is doomed to irrelevance. It is in its real application that Marxist theory gains clarity, and its development is unavoidably dependent on the real strength of workers' movement and the balance of class forces.

Nevertheless, the strength of the working class relies not only on the strength of trade union militancy and struggle, but also on the ability of workers to see their struggle as a class struggle, in common with the struggles of the oppressed the world over. Bourgeois politics and bourgeois political parties constantly work to divide the working class along lines of nationality, race, gender, and many other variables (which is not to suggest, of course, that such a "divide-and-rule" strategy is the totality of the significance of these distinctions). No party of bourgeois government, however radical, can provide workers with the insight or the theory necessary to realise their interests as a class, since every strategy for government always involves ignoring the class nature of the state, and accepting as natural the regime of

borders, police and bourgeois law which continues to divide the working class, materially and ideologically. The strength of the working class depends entirely on the political independence of workers and their ability to escape the ideological vice of bourgeois politics. This means recognising the unavoidable necessity of revolutionary organising, however great the obstacles, and however hopeless the material situation may seem at a given time.

As a clarification: we don't intend the above remarks to imply a prescriptive mandate either way on whether rs21 members, as individuals, should be members of the Labour Party in the current climate. In general, we don't find it necessary to exhaust energy in agonising over this as a question of individual purity or morality: joining Labour is a tactical decision about where a given person feels they can best deploy their individual energies, and rs21 members can make that decision for themselves. We *are* firmly convinced of the need for autonomous revolutionary organisation to exist outside of Labour or Momentum, for reasons that will by now be familiar to many: revolutionary consciousness, constantly eroded by the material and ideological pressures of capitalist society, cannot survive outside of some kind of concrete political organisational form bringing individual revolutionaries into contact, discussion and cooperation with one another; and very plainly, such concrete organisational forms are not possible within Labour or Momentum.

The first task of any revolutionary organisation is to provide the space for the development and distribution of revolutionary theory and analysis, in society, but specifically among those in struggle. As individuals there are countless ways that we could be involved in activism and see more immediately significant results, in campaigns and in our workplaces, and these are vital to engage in and build, but as long as we understand the necessity of building the political power of the working class we also understand the absolute necessity of autonomous revolutionary organisation. *The long-term strength of the working class only gets weaker the longer that the fundamental historical task of revolutionary organisation is postponed.*

Our tasks – building branches and local connections

Recognising that education and analysis is central to our role as a revolutionary organisation should inform every part of our work. We must continually think how best to provide the space for reflection and debate without cutting ourselves off from practical activity and struggle.

Although National Meetings have a sovereign role in determining rs21's position on a given issue, they cannot be the place where most of members' political discussion takes place. A weekend once every few months is simply not enough discussion for members to exchange ideas and form analyses. Moreover, National Meetings are not equally accessible to everyone, being expensive and difficult to travel to, despite mechanisms for ameliorating this. And, as rs21 does not agree nationwide strategies to be pursued in a uniform way by every member, discussion at National Meetings lacks an immediate link with concrete political interventions.

The only practical forum for simultaneously discussing political questions and intervening in struggle is local branch meetings, where rs21 members can come together to share and

reflect on their experiences in campaigns and explore the political and theoretical questions of their activism, as well as coordinating their political interventions collectively and developing a sense of comradeship and collective agency. As an organisation our analysis cannot come from the SG or from a small intelligentsia of individuals, but has to be developed at grassroots levels by members up and down the country (even if it then needs to find expression and ratification at National Meetings to become rs21's official stance).

Branch meetings should be seen primarily as areas of engagement and education for members and supporters, and only secondarily as publicity events. A small meeting with constructive and useful discussion, which builds the confidence and understanding of current members and clarifies our politics, is preferable to a well-attended meeting which solely serves to promote rs21 as a brand. For this reason we endorse the document written by comrades in South London last year on branch organisation, and recommend it to local branches around the country.

If meetings can “start small” – a few members getting together regularly to talk about politics and their own individual organising and activism – then so can a given branch's manner of engaging collectively with rs21, but it is nonetheless important that a collective engagement be initiated. For instance, if members have an interesting discussion about a given issue at a branch meeting, they might then decide to collectively work that discussion up into an article for the website. Talks given to local branches can often be worked up into articles with relatively little work; reports of political demonstrations or picket lines attended are also welcome (including video reports and social media material). We also encourage branches to conduct group discussions on pressing issues before each National Meeting, so that, even if just on an informal level, those members due to attend the NM can express some of the views of those of their local comrades who can't attend.

The health of the organisation and its internal democracy are directly dependent on the health of its local groups. Democratic and accountable practices at local level also help to integrate new members into rs21 and guard against unwelcoming, cliquey environments. Branch democracy is vital for building the confidence of members and addressing issues of representation in the organisation. Internal organisational democracy lessens the likelihood of newer or less experienced members feeling dismissed or undervalued, and is therefore crucial in addressing the everyday social dynamics that undermine participation.

Requirements (1) | What do members need to do?

Being a member of rs21 should involve a certain degree of political and practical commitment; this means, where possible, attending branch meetings, paying subs, and finding ways of relating one's other political activity to rs21.

For the reasons we've set out, we believe that the key to improving rs21's overall focus and cohesion is to build functional local branch operations up and down the country. Naturally, this will require members to invest their time and energy in this task in particular.

Members should see their local branch meetings as their *primary* means of engagement with rs21. Except in exceptional circumstances branch meetings should take precedence over

other areas of organisational involvement. Where members do not currently have a branch they should work to find other members locally and start one; sometimes it may be necessary for the Steering Group or Organiser to help members coordinate these efforts, but it cannot become their responsibility to initiate local organising. Where individual members have no other members near to them at all, we will work on providing centre-led alternative channels for engagement (see next section).

Developing the space for debate and analysis, and developing the capacity for collective self education also requires basic standards of goodwill from members. Members should always seek to act in good faith in discussion and guard against unnecessary cynicism in the organisation. A comradely and good-natured internal environment is one of the most important parts of organising and one of the most fundamental parts of political analysis, since reflection and political debate is only possible away from the heat and mistrust which inevitably characterises everyday political conflict. A basic expectation of comradely behaviour is also therefore a structural issue, and must also necessarily involve a sensitivity among members of what the appropriate forums for discussion and debate are. For instance, Facebook and other public forums are evidently inferior to discussion at branch meetings since they can't be democratically facilitated, they can't provide the nuance of face-to-face discussion, and they are always totally abstracted from the concrete politics of the organisation.

There is also no way around the fact that money is necessary (though not sufficient) in order to run an effective political organisation, allowing us to run and distribute high-quality publications, widen access via subsidised travel and childcare and meet other priorities. For members currently in full-time, Living Wage employment, we recommend overall subs (divided between national and branch, if applicable) of £25 per month. Of course, some members simply cannot afford to pay subs, and this should always be respected. This only makes it more essential that members who *can* afford to pay should do so. Naturally, we must also ensure that individual members never start to assume a stature within rs21 in proportion to the subs they pay; in a socialist organisation, withholding subs money is never an appropriate way of registering disaffection or exerting influence within the organisation short of actually leaving it.

The commitment expected of members also extends to their respect for the politics of the organisation. Members should act both inside and outside of rs21 in a way which is consistent with the democratically arrived at positions of the organisation and not seek to publicly discredit those positions.

In a separate document elsewhere, an approach is set out as to the extreme and specific circumstances in which disciplinary interventions may become necessary in view of any member acting in a particularly deleterious or personally malicious way.

Requirements (2) | What will the SG and Organiser need to do?

None of the above can be achieved without a concerted and consistent investment of effort from members. rs21 is an organisation with a minuscule “centre” – one full-time organiser (perhaps changing soon to two part-timers), plus a Steering Group that meets once per

fortnight, its members making this fit around their work and family commitments. The SG is simply not an organ capable of evolving rs21's overall political analysis or strategy by itself – this work will have to be undertaken by members at local level.

Nonetheless, the approach outlined also has implications for how the SG and Organiser should function, and the leadership will have a key role in making it possible for this programme to succeed.

Firstly, a larger proportion of the Organiser's time and energy could be directed into supporting local branches – meeting halfway, so to speak, with the efforts made at local level. This could involve more visits around the country, more contact and communication with local branch organisers, and, realistically, some time spent chasing up commitments by members and branches to participate in the national organisation (such as by contributing write-ups and reports). Of course, this would imply spending less time on other things, such as publications. In order for the Organiser (or part-time Organisers) to spend more time supporting local branches, raising subs income is also essential, for two reasons: to pay for more frequent travel, and to pay for a part-time paid Website Editor position as agreed at our last National Meeting, thus taking more of the publications workload off the Organiser(s).

Secondly, if local branch activity is successfully boosted, the SG might then also need to spend more time processing and responding to the input of local branches. For instance, if a branch comes up with an idea for a national initiative, then the SG can step in to facilitate a broader discussion in the organisation around that idea. The SG's role should be to act as a conduit between local-level branches (or individual members), and the rest of the membership, helping to generalise discussions and convey valuable insights and discoveries from one part of rs21 to another. This role is roughly what we can aspire to, given the amount of available energy and resources that the SG represents.

Another important function that will have to be taken up by the “centre” (in some distribution between the SG and the Organiser) is the running of a regular online forum geared towards individual members who have trouble getting to branches (for instance, those who are geographically isolated and have no other members near them, or who have access issues in getting to physical meetings). This could be done by way of a regular recurring Skype call, (subject to consultation with branch-less members themselves). We appreciate that efforts in this direction have been made before, but we feel that it's worth making another solid attempt - if rs21 is to become a branch-focused organisation, we'll need an online “branch for the branchless” so that everyone can have a chance to involve themselves.

What else?

The above is not meant to be a comprehensive recipe for overnight success. Plainly, other issues remain: our publications strategy is up in the air, with the magazine in need of a new team; we're struggling to pool enough capacity to organise well-attended, public-facing meetings; gender balance and racial representation in rs21 is generally poor, and needs specific attention. The approach of focusing on branches is a strategic wager based on the idea that face-to-face contact between members, some day-to-day practice in our accountability to each other and the organisation, and the building of democratic channels

for forming and ratifying rs21's body of ideas, are the first and most crucial steps in reinvigorating the organisation.

Conventionally, suggestions that the SG should achieve greater output in certain areas – in developing analysis; in launching unified nationwide campaigns; in ensuring the effective distribution of our print publications – are counterposed with references to the very limited material capacity of the SG/Organiser. It is true that, on one level, sheer necessity impels rs21 to develop a rhythm in which the organisation's basic functions are overwhelmingly carried out by volunteer members. However, this is also a political question. rs21 stands for the possibility of a socialist, revolutionary organisation which is truly democratic in its internal practices; in which members, not a separate wing of full-timers, set the agenda and form the orthodoxy; in which we emphatically reject a "brains / hands" division between leadership and members of the style which is still prevalent in other Marxist organisations.

This document represents our best attempt to set out how that can happen in practice. All counter-arguments and critiques are welcome.