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# **Collapsing the levels, consolidating Our efforts**

**Assessing 5 years of the intermediate analysis.**

Scott Nicholas Nappalos

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December 11, 2015

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*the Industrial Worker, and Anarcho-syndicalist Review. He has co-authored an introduction about Argentine anarchism and the insurrectionary strike wave in Patagonia in the 1920s for the first ever English translation of Patagonia Rebelde by Osvaldo Bayer to be published by AK Press. Presently, he is completing his forthcoming book of philosophy about political methodologies, action, cognition, and the concept of emergence applied to revolutionary change, as well as researching and writing about the relevance of the concepts of time, change, and values for social transformation.*

struggles within. These practices have a lot of potential to be deepened, made more explicit, and unified. Concretely, unions and social projects should hone their political thinking and expand the interaction between the actions, demands, and methods of members and participants and the aspirations of the project. Existing political organizations could benefit from dissolving into unitary social projects or shift their focus to include their own projects around specific issues of daily life.

What form that takes should be experimented with. Still, the objective reality we are facing makes a project like directly implementing a 3-tiered intermediate analysis increasingly unrealistic and in practice damaging to the tiny amount of militants willing to do the work. That strain can be reduced by concentrating work in a single front where ideas, work, and collective action are united and tested and our limited capacities can concentrate on work. There are historical precedents for such work,<sup>28</sup> but in many ways it would be going in a new direction for revolutionaries in North America, and doing so based off of specific experiences of militants today. More than the form of struggle itself the challenge of constructing a politic is necessary to try and find a footing in who we are, what our lives look like, and the context we're acting in; a strategy that could start to break down the historic alienation from political struggle that's settled into this region's recent history.

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<sup>28</sup> Lopez Arango, E. (1929). Translated by Nappalos, SN. Political leadership or ideological orientation of the workers movement. libcom.org

## Contents

Where to place our bets . . . . .	10
The Inspiration . . . . .	11
Terminology . . . . .	14
Practices . . . . .	16
Syndicalist projects and the intermediate approach .	20
Unity and change . . . . .	23

focused on the kinds of things we need to do with our small numbers and problematic situation.

Today my views have changed and I was wrong in many of my writings calling for political organizations and work that assumed an environment where struggle existed, functioning revolutionary localities could coordinate, and national strategizing had a framework to move forward on. Attempting to sustain local projects, intermediate activity, and political groups all without social struggles is an approach that pushes one into duplicating bureaucracies, an excess of meetings, and takes the best and most active people out of potential struggles and into circles of activists.

The upshot of those mistakes is drifting from organizing, built out of the reality of daily life in communities outside established politics, towards small circles usually founded on personal relationships. All the problematic social dynamics that thrive in the left and especially online follow from that (something I have experienced and contributed to myself in those attempts at times). Without seeking to condemn the valid and admirable work that hundreds do, I now believe a better approach would be to minimize the administrative and organizational frameworks we use to instead focus on connecting our ideas to specific problems and work collectively.

Perhaps a better approach is questioning why we can't consolidate our activity into a single unified project? Couldn't we answer specific needs, organize our militants, and develop an anarchist revolutionary practice all under one house? People are transformed through activity and their actions likewise have the potential to transform the social relationships around them. This is the basic framework for revolutionary politics, and likewise where our focus should be. Many recent projects had exactly that character: daily fights of people experiencing exploitation and oppression in structures organized by networks of anarchist militants and with active libertarian politics and a relationship between the goals and ideals and

Many of the assumed points of stability within the US have been undermined. Global power is being challenged, the so-called middle class compromise is eroding, racialized-class divisions are being transformed, new lows of standards of living keep opening up, and in general promises are seen to have been broken. We cannot be naïve and assume any of this in unsolvable and inevitable for the powerful. New repressive or cooperative possibilities are there and already being floated: racist anti-immigrant states, new social welfare and basic income, forms of fused capitalist-state dictatorship, etc. Still the potential for things to shift rapidly is present, and one clear necessity is for people who wish to see large-scale changes to prepare themselves and try to understand and anticipate how they can benefit from those changes as extremely difficult as that is.

Traditional hierarchies are being transformed by the system itself in its adjustment to the crisis, the new global reality, and the tensions of emerging from environmental, economic, and political pressures. Part of our task is to understand and contribute to the creation of a new revolutionary collective subject. In these days in which everything is still up in the air and we are waiting to see where things land, it is difficult to call it. But it is clear that clinging too tightly to the embalmed notions of old revolutionary subjects only deepens the alienation of radicals and makes its actions more difficult, especially in the US where no collective movements exist on a sustained national basis.

A key mistake of many years is to attempt to force our work into the box of revolutionary history, rather than starting with our ideas from our work and building up. People often work backwards from revolution to their immediate situation and become lost, falling back on reading groups, corralling activists, or becoming foot soldiers for trade unions and NGOs. Respecting those factors, our orientation should begin with organizing around that context and acting based on our needs and capacities. The intermediate analysis got this right, and correctly

*Approximately 5 years ago work began on something called the intermediate analysis. A few members of the Recomposition editorial group contributed pieces, worked in groups, and tried to shape their work around the issues raised in the analysis. Between 2010 and today stand a lot of changes and a different landscape for radical action. The maturing of the world financial crisis, series of popular protest movements, and conservative responses have shifted the field from where we stood just a short time ago. Today we present a piece by Scott Nicholas Nappalos exploring what was useful and harmful in the intermediate analysis, and what lessons can be drawn for revolutionary unionists in North America specifically and for the libertarian left more generally.*

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The intermediate level first confronted me after the 2004 bicoastal wildcat strike where the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had attempted to organize a national coordination of the various autonomous local groups of truckers who have come together. That followed a series of debates within the Portland IWW branch, where I was a member, over the role of revolutionaries in building a union. I began a draft on the intermediate analysis during the period of 2004–2006, but returned to it more seriously a few years later in Miami when things had calmed down and in dialogue with other comrades there. In 2010–2011, I contributed to a series of pieces on the intermediate level as part of group discussions within Miami Autonomy & Solidarity, an anarchist communist political organization I was a member of. These reflections came out of years of rumblings, discussions, and experiments by anarchists trying to find ways to apply their ideas to workplace and community organizing in the North American. Nearly as soon as the words hit the page a series of struggles began to test our ideas; first the Madison protests, then Occupy, and later others.

The three or so years that followed the publishing of pieces on the intermediate level led to more discussion and distribution than anyone likely imagined. In a couple cases other groups consciously adopted the terminology and the debate spread outside North American circles through libertarian networks. In today's environment of unstable quietness, many are looking around, taking stock, and picking up old debates to help sort out the events of the past years beginning with the crisis in 2008. It's obvious that there's been a spate of protests that set the decade apart from the past 30 years, though they've remained short-lived and largely localized so far. Vast changes are afoot with sections of the public more open to our politics than any time in recent history, though that hasn't yet translated into any real sustained advances. Some years and modest experiments behind us, it is a good opportunity to re-evaluate the strategy and analysis.

There is no need to beat the drum and reiterate the arguments bit by bit here, but instead interested folks can look to pieces I wrote: *Defining Practice: the intermediate level of organization and struggle*,<sup>1</sup> the three-part piece called *Towards a Theory of Political Organization for our Time*,<sup>2</sup> and also somewhat related the co-authored article with Adam Weaver *Fighting for the Future: The necessity and possibility of national political organization for our time*.<sup>3</sup> The quick summary is that there are two frames to the analysis. The first, the intermediate level, is a tool for looking at the social world and categorizing different types of activity to understand them better. The mass level is an idealized space where all the struggles of all the social actors take place like giant unions or community organizations that encompass entire classes. The political level takes place where specific ideologies, strategies, and politics are coordinated in

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<sup>1</sup> Nappalos, SN. (2010). libcom.org

<sup>2</sup> Ibid (2011). libcom.org

<sup>3</sup> Weaver, A. & Nappalos, SN. (2013). machete408.wordpress.com

the state is not abstract, but lived and real. It is necessary to demonstrate with our actions the need to break from capitalism to achieve our goals, and build cultures of resistance and solidarity out of it. Specifically we in the IWW should work to better integrate our ideals into our organizing curriculum and practice, expand and improve our fundamental documents to reflect our aspirations, and strengthen the intermediate aspect of our work as a network of workers for revolution. The IWW should work as a force in the pursuit of a free society organized for the needs of all against the powers of the ruling order. We could do better to address the collective grievances of people experiencing oppression, whether based on their race, gender, or sexuality, rather than falling into the comfort of focusing on activist spaces to the detriment of addressing the systemic causes or the collective power to change them.

## Unity and change

It is clear that there have been important world historical shifts in geopolitical power, in the mood of the huge swaths of the global populace, United States included, and in the circumstances for radicals acting locally in their cities and towns. Though there have been disruptions through protests like Madison, Occupy, Ferguson, and others, there have not yet been any sustained organizing by a collectivity that would shift our field of action. Fundamental problems remain for us in attempting to build a movement to dismantle systemic power at the same time that there are not ongoing collective responses that we might function as integral parts within. That is the primary political problem of our time and of recent times, and one essentially ignored either to be dismissed with believing you can create movements out of organizational megalomania or religious faith in awaiting their coming.

This weakness has developed into problems developing bigger picture political ideas and strategy. A distinct problem for the IWW is a culture of keeping political issues outside of the union. Members often seek answers to bigger political issues they encounter in their work by going to other groups. That creates a dynamic where organizers who are grappling with the issues of the day leave the union for political organizations and often organizing work to do so. To a lesser degree that was my own path and one that I now think is a mistake. It would have been better to try to construct a politics out of our activities than to build structures that weren't justified by my situation.

More militant forms of reformism such as the fight for 15 and some of the NGO led housing projects after Occupy put these questions more firmly on the table. IWW's tactics that were rare of ten years ago (minority unionism, ignoring independent contractor status, abandoning NLRB recognition, direct action) are increasingly adopted by reformist unions and NGOs. This is an indirect victory and potential danger. Recent events clarify and remind us that direct action and militancy can be used in the service of capitalism. As some of the support behind the Bernie Sanders campaign shows it may become a force to improve capitalism.

The intermediate analysis could help the IWW here by emphasizing our focus on the collective activity of daily life. The union should be elaborating concrete revolutionary proposals *within action* and engaging workers around its politics systematically.<sup>25</sup><sup>26</sup><sup>27</sup> The IWW's antagonism to capitalism and

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<sup>25</sup> Luckily the past 5 years or so has given us some energy in this direction with IWWs in places like the Bay Area, and in the Twin Cities, Providence, and Miami branches. See for example *Wobblyism: Revolutionary unionism for today* (2013) by the Wobblyism Working Group. libcom.org

<sup>26</sup> Hawthorne, N. (2012). "No politics in the union"? Come off it. libcom.org

<sup>27</sup> Wobblyist Working Group. (2015). Memorandum on the Bay Area food mart campaign. libcom.org

that larger field. The intermediate level is where people come together based on shared strategy and experiences to coordinate their activity within struggles; more broad than the ideological unity of the political level, and more narrow than the mass level it is working within.

The second framing of the analysis deals specifically with intermediate *organizations*, which is to say organizations that occupied the space roughly between unions and political parties/organizations. Intermediate organizations are ones constructed with distinct tasks from mass or political ones, and unlike the first aspect of the analysis are physically and actively separate. In the first we are talking about activities that can co-exist alongside others in a variety of formats, the second is specific organizations that imperfectly reflect those activities.

The simplest examples of intermediate organizations are tendencies within social movements. These groups organize militants around a shared platform of various sorts to take action within an organization such as a union or community group. This spans from relatively ideologically broad such as Soldiers of Solidarity<sup>4</sup> in the UAW, to groups for action with broader political orientation such as the communist party's Trade Union Education League and later Trade Union Unity League's unions<sup>5</sup> or the Unemployed Councils of the Great Depression<sup>6</sup>, and overtly political tendencies such as the Federacion Estudiantil Libertaria<sup>7</sup> in Chile today which organizes anarchists on specific proposals for action and

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<sup>4</sup> Wieland, B. 18 of June, 2007. A new force in Detroit: The soldiers of solidarity. truth-out.org

<sup>5</sup> Devinatz, V. A reevaluation of the Trade Union Unity League (1929–1934).. libcom.org

<sup>6</sup> Cloward, R. & Fox Piven, F. (1978). *The Unemployed Workers Movement. From Poor People's Movements: Why they succeed, how they fail.* Vintage Publishers. Reprinted in www.prole.info

<sup>7</sup> Frente de Estudiantes Libertarios (Libertarian Students Front). The process of the initial construction of the FEL. nefac.net

demands within the student unions. Many organizing projects however tend to act as intermediate organizations of militants without having another overarching social organization they work within.

Controversially I'd argue that projects of the anarcho-syndicalist variety in fact act like intermediate organizations. Really there's two ways to look at it: our concept of unions is too narrow, or revolutionary unions/projects represent something altogether different from parties and unions. One way to come at the intermediate level is to question all of this, and say the idea of non-political mass organizations is utopian, they're inherently involving all levels of activity: political, mass, and intermediate. In one sense the dominant idea of what unions and organizing projects are (for left thinkers anyway) has become incredibly narrow; essentially apolitical groups that try to win demands for the whole of the class or some section of the class.

This scenario is far from universal in fact, because historically it was rarely if ever the case. It has been common for unions to fight around a range of issues from housing, immigration, and the oppression of ethnicities and women with examples in the IWW, FORA, CNT, and FAU but also reformist unions.<sup>8</sup> The meaning of union is interpreted as about the workplace narrowly defined. However in South America, to take an example, unions came out of resistance societies which were unions of workers and proletarians organized around a variety of different collective needs and projects. Resistance societies were a militant offshoot of mutual aid networks that included things like women's issues, housing, workplace, and political issues that affected the class

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<sup>8</sup> Nappalos, SN. (2013). Lost conversations: questioning the legacy of anarchosyndicalism. Reprinted in *Ideas and Action*. [ideasandaction.info](http://ideasandaction.info)

lines created by left thinkers, and largely goes against the current of conventional revolutionary thinking.<sup>24</sup>

The dissonance of syndicalist practice coupled with its clear relevance to daily life creates creative space for thinking like the intermediate analysis. Within the IWW and various solidarity networks debates continue over lifespan of organizing, the role of militants in these projects, revolutionary ideas, etc. The harsh reality of consequences for participating in collective struggle in people's lives creates tension. Some seek to find more stability, permanence, and power through institutionalizing gains, numerical growth, and lowest common denominator politics. Others grapple with building up a revolutionary force in practice, while remaining engaged and relevant in daily struggles and avoiding becoming yet another political micro-sect around personalities. These tensions show the relevance of the issues raised by the analysis, the importance of that kind of work being done by in workplaces and communities, and the inherent pressures building in the context we find ourselves in.

The IWW has slid backwards compared to its history; becoming decreasingly political over time. This mirrors the decline of activity and estrangement from a collective place within working class life similar to other proletarian organizations. It once represented a distinct tradition separate from other currents (such as reformist socialists in the Socialist Party of Socialist Labor Party, statist Marxist Leninists, etc.) and rejecting reform within capitalism and the capitalist state itself in favor of its vision of industrial democracy, industrial communism, or the cooperative commonwealth. The IWW isn't just a democratic union, a militant union, or unionism with red flags; it's a revolutionary anti-capitalist union.

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<sup>24</sup> The traditional line of much of the left would have unions like the IWW and projects like Solidarity Networks devoid of revolutionary politics, which are supposed to come from the political parties and organizations.



how to get out of that situation, the analysis probably made it worse by multiplying meetings and administrative bureaucracy in practice rather than solving it with alternatives. Most of the time we will need to engage in work at all levels, a deep strategic problem that needs serious thought and experimentation.

This tension was present within the formulation itself separating out distinct tasks for M->I and I->M. Put that way gives the false impression that there are distinct people and fronts to coordinate and work within, when there aren't. All projects face the same contradictions created by the weakness of struggle at this time and are forced to wrestle with all the roles laid out. A better way to come out of these issues is to collapse all of these things that really are the same. Radical projects today should be trying to find ways to unify and condense issues of daily life under capitalism, building and sustaining revolutionaries and practices, and developing a praxis linking daily work to social transformation.

## **Syndicalist projects and the intermediate approach**

A good place to look for answers within the US and Canada to these problems are the various contemporary syndicalist inspired projects like Solidarity Networks and the IWW. It isn't that their members were overtly looking to the analysis for guidance and debate (few were, most were not), but rather that the issues themselves raised in the analysis have been grappled with by militants attempting to create revolutionary projects founded in struggles around daily life under capitalism. This makes sense because such work perpetually transgresses the

like militarism, anti-clericalism, immigration, and health.<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup> This was perhaps always the norm for revolutionary unions, but not unheard of for reformist unions growing out of the environment of working class communities of past generations. Lately SEIU and other recuperative unions have started funding non-workplace organizing with non-members often with the goal of electoral victories, begging the question.

The focus of unions only narrowed in the US with their institutionalization after the NLRA when they became more fully integrated into capitalism. Political and social struggles overlapped with workplace activities, and unions were often grouped around political outlook. Outside the US, most of the world has a parliamentary system for unions where workers choose between them based on their political ideology. Moreover American unions and non-profits are largely ideological organs of the Democratic Party in terms of their activity, funding, and vision. So even today the idea of neutral mass organizations is a bit utopian.

Another way to think about these projects is that certain groups play a special role. They are different from run-of-the-mill unions, community groups, etc. While it's true all groups are political in some sense, anarcho-syndicalist unions, revolutionary community groups, and solidarity networks have a unique relationship between their ideas and practices. They all use activity to build movement and have a connection between their goals, ideals, and actions in a way that political organizations and more broad unions don't. In this way maybe they don't fit neatly into any of the levels and occupy space between them all. Whether we widen the concept of mass organization,

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<sup>9</sup> De Laforcade, G. (2011). Federative futures: waterways, resistance societies, and the subversion of nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Anarchism of the Río de la Plata region. *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*. Vol. 22: 2 Pg. 71–96. Accessed 12/8/15. eial.tau.ac.il

<sup>10</sup> Sociedad de Resistencia de Rosario. (2014). Translated by Nappalos, SN. What is a resistance society? libcom.org

or we alter how we understand groups like the IWW, CNT, Solidarity Networks, or other such projects, the outcome is the same in practice. Intermediate organization tried to capture some of that nuance.

## Where to place our bets

The strategy itself started from the recent low level of activity in terms of social movements and the alienation of revolutionaries and the left from concrete activity. Briefly (we'll return to this) the analysis tried to overcome twin difficulties for revolutionaries. First, focusing on short-term struggles tends to lose steam after a few years when there's not a sustained intervention by a subject of struggle. Second, shifting energy towards political organization alone likewise isolates revolutionaries who otherwise have no work or relationships to keep their ideological circles grounded.

Honing our energy to develop the intermediate level (- I) was meant as a way to develop all the kinds of activity that wouldn't happen by only focusing on short-term struggles that tend to burn people out and disperse (at the mass level - M), and revolutionary groupings that can become insulated and isolated from struggle (at the political level P). Crafted into a formula this became the idea of organizing rank and file militants to coordinate strategically, deepen political ideas, etc., i.e. operate at the intermediate level (M->I). Because of the lulls in activity a goal was also to get revolutionaries to become active in mass struggles if they weren't already (I->M).

"...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 strate-

grounding in actually existing activity only stacks on the gravitational pull of the culture of small circle cliques already too common. This could change of course in the future, but the left has deep inertia to remain constructing small social networks that become insulated from outside activity. The best proposals in the world will have a hard time breaking out of that from the inside. Political activists tend to be easy to motivate to doing lectures, film showings, and other intellectual activities matching why they got involved, but nearly impossible to shift towards the day to day work of social struggles. At least this is true if we are trying to convince people from within those milieus. The main starting point then is not having a group of experienced activists ready to strategize and move with a united orientation in organizing. Most recruits coming out of political ideals lack experience both in struggle and helping organize struggles, and need chances to cut their teeth and learn the ropes; which brings us full circle to the vacuum of consistent spaces to intervene and the need to start from scratch.

The troubles with these two approaches are amplified by the tiny numbers of committed revolutionaries who will actually do the work. If you try to create projects or organizations at each level (a mass organization, an intermediate organization, and a separate political organization), the potential for obligations and meetings to spiral out of control is strong. Even if a group picks only one issue that they all work on and tries to keep meetings to a minimum, participating in each organization will consume a full time worker's time while leaving very little left to carry out the work decided on in the meetings; let alone for family, care work, personal betterment, or mental health. Likewise when there's few militants and little struggle, most of the tasks fall on the same people virtually copying themselves within the structures of each group, i.e. one member secretary of the party, treasurer of the intermediate organization, and steward of the union with each group numerically less than 20. If the main question of our time is

parties, and repressive bureaucracies.<sup>22</sup> Even if you hold them in higher esteem, the overwhelming majority of the working class is never touched by them,<sup>23</sup> and they offer incredibly few opportunities to participate aside from certain sectors and localities where they are strong; a challenge for any national strategy focusing on working only inside existing unions or non-profits.

Realistically most organizers will be starting from scratch. Doing so puts immense pressure on these small groups to sustain activity, build, organize, train and mentor members, and continue their separate political work. The trouble with M->I then is that revolutionaries end up having to wear three different hats at once, all the while hoping to develop the intermediate level. Outside of periods of intense struggle, militancy and radicalization tends to develop unevenly over time with the interaction between relationships and experiences in discontinuous struggles.

Another route you can go, trying to mobilize the left to build struggles, also faces its own problems. The absence of organized social struggles pushes revolutionaries to draw from other wells. In general US revolutionaries come not from struggles but from their individual interest in revolutionary ideas, history, etc., and usually via academia or subcultural scenes. This situation creates a pressure to mobilize these ideological-political contacts to engage in social struggles. People who are brought together by abstract ideas and interests in politics are not (in today's context) generally motivated to do the distinctly different work of contributing to struggles.

How we approach people matters, and attempting to move from personal political hobbies to collective action without any

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<sup>22</sup> Nappalos, SN. (2015). A new society must be built. *Recomposition*. re-composition.info

<sup>23</sup> Swanson, A. February 24 2015. The incredible decline of American unions, in one animated map. *The Washington Post*. www.washingtonpost.com

gic priorities are those developed by MAS which I am drawing from and borrowing".<sup>11</sup>

Despite my own misgivings about the analysis which I'll spell out below, I think the general thrust of this stays true today. The way out of the muck that revolutionaries are stuck in is neither to just keep chasing short-term struggles in an era when the exploited do not consistently intervene in society, nor is it to insulate ourselves inside political organizations whose role today is largely intellectual and frequently individualistic.

## The Inspiration

My own journey to a concept of an intermediate function of militants began in the IWW. In the early 2000s a debate developed within parts of the IWW based on the experiences of organizers who had reached a peak of activity after a decade of creating attempts at revolutionary unionism. The pressures of trying to sustain organizing in a context in which workers were not self-organizing their struggles created different approaches within the IWW. On the one hand, some felt that adopting tactics like full time paid staff, participating in NLRB elections for exclusive bargaining rights, and signing contracts with employers could extend the union's life after workplaces cool down and normally the IWW would recede. From the late 90s to mid 2000s there were years of IWW contracts and a few experiments in paying full time staff. The outcomes were similar to business unions with most failing, and the remaining falling into a familiar pattern of the union as an outside servicing body with little interaction from the workers (though there are a small amount of interesting counterexamples in IWW shops).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nappalos, SN. (2010). Defining practice: the intermediate level of organization and struggle. libcom.org

<sup>12</sup> You can get a sense of some of that debate, most of which never was written down, from discussing around contracts and the direct union-

Others, myself included, were considering a different role for groups like the IWW. Rather than attempting to seize and maintain terrain in all struggles, we had experimented with creating networks of militants that could fight around immediate grievances of workers, recruit and plant seeds based on those struggles, and move on when the fights weren't sustained. By building up these networks of militants developed in direct struggles, we sought to create power to contest the conditions of daily living and maintain, spread, and expand explicit revolutionary ideas within the lives of workers made concrete in their actions.<sup>1314</sup>

These tensions were reinforced when port truckers shut down huge sections of trades through wildcat strikes around gas prices and conditions independently from all political forces and generally against the unions in the ports.<sup>15</sup> The workers had self-organized, and had a long history of being able to create and sustain their own struggles.<sup>16</sup> What they lacked was the ability to maintain organization across ethnic and geographic lines and across time, something unresolved still today. Often they would strike and win, only to have a dizzying array of employers play workers off each other, buy off leaders, and slowly renege on their agreements one-by-one. Infighting along various lines proved to be a serious issue for a national movement of port truckers.

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ism pamphlet. Unfortunately the same debates and mistakes seem to repeat themselves every few years with new generations of organizers and gaps in continuity of militants who came before them. Debate on direct unionism. (2011). libcom.org

<sup>13</sup> Nappalos, SN. (2005). Lessons from a social service workers strike. libcom.org

<sup>14</sup> Direct unionism: a discussion paper. (2011). libcom.org

<sup>15</sup> Bekken, J. June 2004. Troqueros wildcat California ports. *The Industrial Worker*. www.iww.org

<sup>16</sup> Pete, L. June 2004. Wildcats disable West Coast ports. *The Industrial Worker*. www.iww.org

lar activity. In theory the intermediate analysis could be seen as support for this sort of thing. In our time revolutionaries have been defined largely by grappling with the absence of movements and the strain of this work impeded both implementation and likely debate around the potential of another approach. Without sustained activity in social movements, the analysis hovers in uncertainty.

As written and first conceived, the intermediate level was where militants from mass struggles came together based on their experiences to work together. Correctly, the analysis started from the problem of this and argued that because of our specific historical context we needed to focus our energy on intermediate activity. By doing the mentoring, network building, strategizing, and development it was thought we could help create conditions for more powerful movements which would open doors for revolutionary change.

There is and was ambiguity around implementing this though in part due to the context. Differences were perhaps already cemented within the M->I and I->M formulas. Where do the militants come from? How do people with grievances become at least semi-permanently involved beyond their own problems? How do political activists without any experience in organizing shift to working with people outside their circles? Semantics aside of how we conceptualize the intermediate, in practice this creates problems as both directions you might go with (I->M and M->I) have their difficulties in our situation.

There are neither consistent struggles nor organizations that would provide the natural field for revolutions in North America. Instead we see a fractured social subject emerging and disappearing separated by local ity and time. Unions and non-profits are internalized oppositions grossly contained by capitalism and ossified by their institutional ties to capital, the

example there's often people mentoring, planning strategically with other militants, doing run of the mill workplace or housing organizing, and things like high-level theory and study. All three kinds of activities often manage to pop up. Likewise even political groups that believe in strict neutral mass organization frequently find themselves doing organizing because of the vacuum of movements that exists in our situation. If there's no mass organization to refer people to, what do you do as revolutionaries? This could be better understood by moving away from talk of levels and even organizations.

## Practices

The newness of the vocabulary helped popularize it, and it spoke to people's experiences in a time where social movements were (and are) largely absent or fractured. The practical impact however was fairly small despite the popularity of the language and even its adoption by some political groups. Concretely revolutionaries have faced serious challenges to create living practices that interface with their goals and ideas in recent memory. Overt projects that take on grievances of daily life are in short supply. Decades of ruling class assault in the US have not been met by much response. While unions are rightly vilified for many of their rigidity and ossification, the reality is that workers have not taken their unions to task, built new ones, or alternatives. Largely this has meant that new generations of radicals start from ground zero every few years and usually without much to go on. Creating simultaneously mass, intermediate, and political work or even organizations is extremely difficult, especially given that committed militants generally number less than a handful even in major cities in the US.

One strategy could be to attempt to unify the left, and use organizing within a bigger left as the means to leverage popu-

Various truckers approached the IWW primarily for assistance in coordinating their struggles. Other unions feared having their treasuries seized with anti-trust legislation and didn't want to touch it.<sup>17</sup> The truckers were classified as independent contractors and allegedly had no right to organize according to some lawyers. Employers claimed collective activity was akin to mob price fixing, and threatened to use similar laws (and did proceed with their threats for short periods during strikes). Ten years later we see that many of us were right in the IWW that much of this was a bluff and the conservative leadership of unions were too preoccupied with their treasuries to see the big picture, which isn't to say that such tools wouldn't be used against militant workers in the future. Still, it put the IWW in a unique position in the labor movement of the time. We had modest resources and experiences to work together with the truckers in challenging major issues in an industry that touched practically the whole economy.

The dominant concepts handed down through both the Marxist and anarchist left of the time were grossly inadequate to describe the role of the IWW in fights like this.<sup>18</sup> Many sought to fit everything into two boxes: so-called mass organizations like unions open to everyone for some basic economic end, or political organizations of people grouped around shared ideology (and often strategy, tactics, etc). In this specific case, the IWW was neither negotiating with

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<sup>17</sup> For instance see: Etrucker. Judge ends shutdown of Miami port. July 24 2004. [www.etrucker.com](http://www.etrucker.com)

<sup>18</sup> Some strains of syndicalism and councilism have addressed these issues differently, however that type of thought, for lack of a better term 'unitary', has been particularly weak in North America where stark divisions between political organizations and social organizations of struggle have been dominant. I left them out for that reason. For historical accounts of some of these debates between unitary and dualist ideas about organization within the International Workers Association (IWA-AIT) see Damier, V. (2012). Translated by Archibald, M. From *Petr Alekeyevich Kropotkin*. Ed. I. I. Blauberg. (Moscow: Rosspen). Pg. 266-299. [www.katesharpleylibrary.net](http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net)

employers nor in many ways organizing the workers in the immediate local sense. Of course if the struggles had maintained themselves and not folded with concessions from employers, the IWW likely would have faced those questions (and we did with contradictions in one place; Stockton, California where workers joined the IWW en masse trying to organize short-haul trucking at a rail yard). The failure of the thinking I encountered to explain my experiences and emerging roles for workers organizations like the IWW led me to these questions.

These issues are still very much alive. The intermediate analysis while raising them has not had the impact it might have had in this sense. There is little exploration still of how different contexts and roles revolutionaries can play should impact both how we think about ourselves and our projects, and how we should change what we're doing to move away from the inadequate schemata of the historical left. The ideas imported, almost exclusively from readings and history, do not fit the activity of anarchists in the US, and there are far too few attempts to construct new theories to match our practices and experiment with new practices that address the problems in the theories we've inherited. The intermediate level was in part an imperfect attempt at starting such a project.

## Terminology

A big weakness of the intermediate analysis was terminology. Many who engaged the theory took it to be ranked hierarchically from the least important (mass level) to most (political level). I tried explicitly to discourage that; especially since intermediate type work was supposed to be the priority. Still the word itself, intermediate, encourages misinterpretations which were extremely common. *Intermediate between what?* The word itself could suggest a transition that should be resolved in either direction between the mass and political;

i.e. what the intermediate is really after is political parties or unions. This is an instrumental view of intermediate work and was the most commonly heard feedback. That is, we should engage in intermediate practices (uniting around strategy with other militants) in so far as they advance the political organization and/or the mass front people are working in.

A part of the problem here is merely talking about levels and organizations. Beyond contributing to a hierarchical understanding of the issues, talk of levels and organizations encouraged a schematic reading of the intermediate level where you could evaluate different work or organizations, classify them based on the schema, and try to move them towards or away from different roles according to their level. The actual ideas aimed more at looking at roles people can play in their work, how those evolve, and their trajectory.<sup>19,20,21</sup> That more dynamic view though is not helped by the language of levels which can sound static to many.

Despite well-intentioned disclaimers to the contrary, most readers likely interpreted the pieces as calling for pure mass/intermediate/political organizations and using them as litmus tests against actually existing organizations. For clarity's sake, pure organizations that only follow their prescribed role have likely never existed, and would not be good things if they did. If you view the different levels as roles or types of activity people can engage in, all organized projects will have all levels in play. The different activities interact and evolve across time and in reaction to their context and the development of their participants. In solidarity networks or revolutionary unions for

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<sup>19</sup> Particularly see the series of pieces on *Towards a Theory of Political Organization for our Time* cited above for some of that nuance. My positions have shifts, but kernels of those critiques are already there.

<sup>20</sup> Hawthorne, N. (2011). The intermediate level and trajectories of struggle. *Recomposition*. [recomposition.info](http://recomposition.info)

<sup>21</sup> Kahlo, A. & Zee, T. (2014). The intermediate moment part 1. *Unity and Struggle*. [unityandstruggle.org](http://unityandstruggle.org)