



# RECLAIMING REVOLUTION

*history, summation & lessons from the work of* **Standing Together to  
Organize a Revolutionary  
Movement (STORM)**

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## **PREFACE: WHY THIS DOCUMENT?**

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This is the story of Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement (STORM), a revolutionary cadre organization based in the San Francisco Bay Area. From September 1994 to December 2002, STORM helped to re-invigorate the Left, both locally and nationally. STORM members fought on the frontlines of some of the most important struggles of those eight years. We built organizations and institutions that continue to fight. And we supported the development of a new generation of revolutionary internationalists in the Bay Area and across the country.

During that time, we gained a wealth of experience that offers the Left some important lessons. To ensure that those lessons are not lost or clouded by time and memory, we have chosen to document that experience now. We humbly offer this document in hopes that it may help move the Left forward.

As young leftists starting a revolutionary organization, we certainly could have used such a document. Most of us had never been in a revolutionary organization. After all, STORM's membership was always more than 60 percent women and more than 75 percent people of color\* – people all too often (and tragically) marginalized by and alienated from the U.S. Left.

For eight years, we fumbled in the dark of our youth and inexperience as we tried to build STORM and a broader movement that would finally end the murderous reign of U.S. imperialism. And with the Left in retreat globally and nationally, we seemed to be starting nearly from scratch.

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\* During its existence, STORM used “people of color” to describe and refer to people within the United States from oppressed races and nations. Though some of the former members who worked on this document now prefer the term “Third World people,” we use “people of color” in order to remain consistent with our organizational history. This change and the disagreement among us on this question reflect our evolving understanding and analysis of race and nation in the U.S. context. We ask the reader to take whatever political implications the term “people of color” has with a grain of salt.

We poured our hearts and wisdom into answering questions with which earlier revolutionaries must surely have struggled. But, for a variety of reasons, we didn't have access to the thoughts of those previous freedom fighters. And when we did get access to them, it was too late.

When STORM decided to disband in December 2002, we also decided to write a summation of our experience – the good and the bad. We didn't do this to rehash old issues. We didn't do it to prove anyone right or wrong. We did it to give other people a chance to learn from our experience – because no one else should have to reinvent the wheel.

Reclaiming Revolution is divided into five sections. The first section offers an overview of the historical period in which STORM operated. The second section details STORM's history. Next, we summarize the politics that defined the organization. The fourth section describes STORM's organizational structure. And we end the document by evaluating STORM's work – our successes, our errors and the lessons we have drawn from all of this.

The primary lesson is this: the fight for liberation must continue, and it must win. We set out to change the world, to fight for and win true freedom for our people. Eight years later, we have not yet succeeded. And now we have lost the organization that gave us a place from which to struggle.

But we have not lost hope. We all remain committed to being a part of future efforts to build strong organizations that can finally win total liberation. This document is the first such "future effort."

**Hide nothing from the masses of people. Tell no lies.  
Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties,  
mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories.**

**- Amilcar Cabral, African revolutionary leader**

## WHO WROTE THIS DOCUMENT?

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Many of STORM's former members contributed to the development of this document, including almost all of the people who were part of the organization at its dissolution in 2002. Once it was completed, nineteen of STORM's former members (a majority of our membership) expressed strong support for the analysis and conclusions of this document.

*Reclaiming Revolution* is an attempt to pull our various perspectives on our history into a single document. Although our unity is not absolute, the majority of STORM's former members felt like we could stand by the conclusions of this document.

These people all remain deeply engaged in movement-building work. Many of us are building power in working class communities of color. Others are building left institutions. Still others are finding ways to "serve the people." But all of us remain explicitly committed to revolutionary politics and revolutionary organization.

# RECLAIMING REVOLUTION

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To truly understand something, you must understand its context. So to understand STORM, you must understand the global and national political stage on which we acted. For it is the material realities of the world – not well-intentioned but wishful revolutionary thinking – that determine what revolutionaries can achieve.

STORM emerged in a moment of deep crisis for the international Left and growing momentum for sections of the imperialist class. Our existence was book-ended by the Bush regimes – George Sr. (1988-1992) and George Jr. (2000-present). This was an extremely difficult period for the Left, both inside and outside the United States. Our history – as well as our successes and errors – must be understood in this context.

### **International Context**

In the early 1990s, the international Left was in jeopardy. The Soviet Union had fallen in 1989. China was turning towards capitalism. And although very few people from our generation identified with Soviet “socialism,” the fall of the world’s first and most powerful socialist nation undermined the material strength and public legitimacy of the Left around the world.

Capitalism declared “victory” in the Cold war. It claimed that this victory marked the very end of history itself. And people across the political spectrum agreed with Margaret Thatcher’s statement that “There Is No Alternative” to capitalism.

The global ruling class began to build towards a neo-liberal “New World Order” in which the United States would become the world’s one and only super-power and in which corporations would plunder the resources and people of the world without limit. Third World socialist nations were sucked back into the capitalist world economy on the neo-liberal terms of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. National liberation movements now lacked their traditional bases of international support. Instead of being a part of a powerful global front against imperialism, these movements found themselves isolated and



facing the full might of imperialism with fewer resources.

These changes led to a fundamental realignment of world power in favor of the ruling class and away from the people of the world. Revolutionaries could no longer view the socialist nations as the base area, the national liberation movements as the spearhead and the working class and democratic movements in the imperialist nations as the rear-guard in a united global movement for freedom from oppression and exploitation. The international anti-imperialist strategy that had guided the Left for decades had faltered.

### **Domestic Context**

Inside the United States, the Left was in a similar crisis. In 1980, just ten years earlier, there were large, national revolutionary organizations composed largely of young people and people of color. But by the early 1990s, most of those organizations had fallen apart.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's turn towards capitalism, many veteran leftists entered a period of identity crisis and reevaluation. The mass movements that had exploded in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s had gone into a serious downturn by the 1980s.

Meanwhile, the Right was on a vicious offensive. Working at both elite and grassroots levels, it was successfully rolling back the gains from the civil rights movement and other freedom movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In firm control of the U.S. government, the Right slashed funding for social programs like education and welfare – securing profits for corporations and helping pay for U.S. imperial aggression. It curtailed the civil liberties of people of color and poor people throughout the United States. And the Right developed new tactics that the Left had no answer for, such as using ballot initiatives to implement right wing policies.

This historical moment presented us with different challenges than those that our movement elders of the 1960's had faced when they were young. When they came to revolutionary consciousness, the international left was on an upsurge. It had a relatively clear strategy and an abundance of Third World leadership. When STORM emerged,

the Left lacked momentum, clear strategies and strong organizations.

In this challenging context, STORM wanted to reinvigorate the Left through grassroots struggles. We wanted to build strong organizations that could fight for the people. And we wanted to reclaim and reshape revolutionary theory. We had successes and failures, advances and setbacks, but none of it can be understood outside of our historical context.



### Early 1990s: The Roots of STORM

#### **RAW: Roots Against War**

STORM traces its organizational roots back to Roots Against War (RAW), a group of young people of color who came together to fight against the Gulf War in the early 1990s. RAW fused militant direct action, sharp politics and exciting cultural work. In doing so, it laid the groundwork for the next decade of revolutionary politics among young people of color in the Bay Area.

Before RAW, young activists of color in San Francisco generally viewed the city's street demonstrations as a "white thing." Organizations like ACT-UP and Women's Action Coalition could engage many people in militant direct action. Others, like the International Action Center, could organize massive demonstrations. But all of these organizations were overwhelmingly white and middle class.

RAW changed all that. Its ranks filled exclusively with people of color, RAW broke the white Left's dominance of San Francisco's street protest activity. In the early 1990s, RAW became noted for its massive, militant marches and direct action mobilizations. At critical periods like the first Gulf War (1990-91), Women's Clinic Defense (1991-93), the "Rodney King" uprisings (1992 and 1993), and the 500 Years of Resistance protests (1992), RAW helped young activists of color seize center stage.

RAW's marches were militant and confrontational, regularly defying police commands and occasionally plunging through police lines and barricades. Prioritizing reaching out to and including the poorer, browner communities that the established white Left tended to ignore, RAW led marches through neighborhoods like the Mission and the Western Addition. And RAW's marches were always educational, as fiery public speakers and well-crafted written materials explained the issue at hand.



Together, RAW's political priorities and practical methods allowed the group to lead thousands of people into direct confrontation with the state. As the ruling class faced political crises and people across the country questioned the system's legitimacy, RAW created space for young militants of color to express their outrage and develop radical views.

RAW's strength flowed in part from its strong group of core leaders. Though young, RAW's leaders had experience in radical politics. Several of them were veterans of the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade, the youth wing of the Revolutionary Communist Party. Informed by these young militants, the group took hard and uncompromising positions that expressed anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist politics from the beginning. Using written literature and impassioned speeches, RAW popularized these ideas and brought them out into the community.

But sharp radical leadership was not RAW's only strength. RAW succeeded in large part thanks to its ability to create a dynamic, exciting and relevant culture around itself. The group attracted many talented artists and cultural workers – from DJ's and poets to drummers and graffiti artists. Along with RAW's more experienced activists, these young women and men created an organizational and movement culture that not only promoted revolutionary politics but also grew out of and reflected the experiences of young people of color. Incredible banners, strong visual propaganda and infectious, rhythmic and radical chants were all hallmarks of RAW's work. Ultimately, this culture helped RAW to change the flavor of direct action organizing, making it a space that was more relevant and accessible to young people of color.

RAW was not just a political organization. Beyond its political work, the group was also the center of a Bay Area social scene. This scene provided the context in which many young people of color and white radicals "came of age" politically. RAW drew from this broad social scene of young people of color to make radicalism popular.

Despite its strengths and successes, RAW also faced many challenges. Its membership structure was completely open. Along with the group's success at mobilizing huge numbers of people in moments of crisis, this

led to a widely fluctuating membership. There would frequently be an almost entirely different group of people sitting in the room from one meeting to the next. This open and undefined structure led to a general level of disorganization and discontinuity. Many young activists cycled in and out, making it difficult to maintain organizational stability.

There was also political tension within the group. The people in RAW upheld a range of different politics, from cultural nationalism to revolutionary communism. They tried to maintain cohesion and solidarity under the banner of Third World unity while struggling over the organization's analysis and work.

These challenges, combined with state repression from without and sexism and unprincipled sexual behavior within the group, led to RAW's eventual demise. Though the organization fell apart, it had developed dozens of young revolutionaries of color who would carry on its vision. Many RAW members became community and labor organizers. Others built youth organizations like Loco Bloco and Education for Liberation.

### **Regrouping: The Aftermath of RAW's Demise**

Shortly after RAW's dissolution in the spring of 1992, several RAW veterans came together with other people of color activists as well as white activists from BACORR (Bay Area Coalition for Our Reproductive Rights) with the idea of starting a new organization. They began studying together to begin developing a shared political language.

In September 1993, two dozen activist leaders formed a nine-month study group. The group included people of color and white folks. It included communists, anarchists and other radical activists. There was tension in the group from the beginning, as the committed anarchists and committed communists clashed over what the group should and should not read.

The final reading list focused mainly on movement history, like the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement, as well as several Marxist classics. The study process was difficult because many people didn't read and attendance was inconsistent. But by studying together,



those who stuck it out developed a shared political vocabulary and some common points of historical reference.

When the study group ended in June of 1994, the remaining participants decided to start a revolutionary collective. They spent several months haggling over language for a constitution, points of unity and organizational guidelines. It was a long and hard process. Political differences repeatedly surfaced in debates about structure and language of the constitution and points of unity. Several more study group members dropped out of the process in the midst of the debates over the new group's constitution. But at last, the surviving participants formed a new group.

### **1994: Launching STORM & First Steps**

Having come through the study group and the post-study debates and discussions, eight people launched Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement (STORM) on November 2, 1994. They spent that rainy day protesting Proposition 187 – the racist, anti-immigrant ballot initiative that California voters had approved a day earlier.

STORM was an attempt to preserve and carry forward RAW's radical militant energy into a more systematic organizational form. STORM had two central points of unity:

- We need solidarity among all oppressed people – working class people, People of color, women, queer people – in the fight for “total” liberation from all systems of oppression – centrally including capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia and able-ism.
- To win liberation, we need change on a revolutionary scale.

These politics were meant to take RAW's Third World unity and expand it to a unity of all oppressed people. STORM also began a step to RAW's left by making an explicit commitment to revolutionary change. STORM also explicitly prioritized the leadership of women of color in the revolutionary movement – something RAW had never done.

As the “next step” in the RAW experiment, most of STORM's founders had assumed that many RAW veterans (particularly those with Marxist leanings) would come together under STORM's banner. But that didn't happen. Many had moved away or gone back to school. And disputes – primarily among the three committed anarchists and the six committed communists – had driven many of the more politically experienced and ideologically committed revolutionary Marxists out of the study process.

So in the end, STORM represented a new collection of movement activists with a wide range of political experience and ideology. STORM's eight founders were playing important roles in the movement as leaders, organizers and institution-builders. They included labor organizers, anti-police-brutality organizers and pro-choice and anti-domestic-violence activists. They worked with organizations like HERE/Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union Local 2850, Bay Area PoliceWatch (later to become the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights) and various direct action organizations.

### **STORM's Initial Design, Initial Challenges**

Now that they had started a revolutionary organization, these eight people had to figure out how to run it, how to build it. They decided to design STORM as a loose cadre collective whose structure borrowed from both the anarchist and communist traditions.

STORM had a closed membership. People could not just decide to join whenever they wanted to. Instead, the group invited small “classes” of activists to become new members. This ensured more consistency and accountability within the membership. It also allowed the group to maintain its strict demographic quota requirements; each class was required to be at least 75 percent people of color and 60 percent women.

STORM also expected more of its members than RAW had. Every member was expected to be active in at least one of the organization's work groups. They also had to follow STORM's Codes of Conduct and Security Protocols – agreed-to methods of work and conduct that were designed to ensure group cohesion and discipline.

These features of STORM's structure were borrowed from the "cadre organization" model popular in the communist political tradition. But unlike such organizations, STORM had no designated leadership. Instead, STORM borrowed from "spokes" model of the anarchist tradition. The group made all decisions together by a modified consensus process. In terms of formal leadership, STORM had only a Coordinating Committee (CC). The CC was an administrative body, with representation from each of STORM's work groups.

This structure led to some early problems in STORM's relationship to other groups and activists in the movement. Some had criticisms of STORM's closed structure and its poor communication about its decisions. Other people, wary of the "cadre" structure, thought STORM was trying to start a new party or that STORM thought of itself as "the vanguard." Some felt excluded from the founding process while others thought that it had taken too long. Some people had lofty expectations of the organization and were disappointed when not all of those expectations were met immediately. And without a clearly identified leadership structure, it was difficult for STORM to respond to these concerns and criticisms.

STORM also faced larger political challenges. As noted earlier, the Right was on the move, while the Left was in decline. In particular, the Right had seized on the statewide ballot initiative as a way to push its agenda. Bay Area radicals, having avoided electoral politics for years as an "inherently reformist" arena, were ill-equipped to respond to these tactics. STORM members didn't want to move into reform politics, and we were unsure how to use direct action "street tactics" to effectively fight back in the context of electoral fights.

With this confusion, the militant direct action scene in the Bay Area, which had laid the groundwork for STORM, began drying up. Large-scale direct actions drew fewer and fewer people. And fewer young activists were moving to the Bay Area because of the skyrocketing costs of living associated with the dot.com boom. As a result, STORM did not have a large pool of new activists to work with or clear work to relate to.

## **Stepping Out into the World**

In spite of these challenges, STORM got to work. STORM's early program reflected an intention to take RAW's strength – mobilizing young people of color into militant direct action – and combine it with more deeply-rooted organizing in our communities. The organization's early work was to be based in low-income communities of color and also to recognize the central role of youth in movements for social change.

As STORM was getting off the ground as an organization, its members remained deeply involved in their current movement work. They made important contributions and helped set an explicitly revolutionary pole in their mass work. Then in February, just a few months after its founding, STORM brought in its first class of new members.

Some of these new members had been involved in RAW, but most hadn't. Two young women of color came from political/cultural youth work with Education for Liberation. Two people came from anti-poverty organizing. Starting their work with Empty the Shelters! (which organized student leaders to work in working class communities around poverty issues), they moved on to build the Justice Education Action Project (a project designed to educate young people about their rights in the criminal justice system) and the General Assistance Rights Union (which organized General Assistance recipients in San Francisco to fight for their rights). One woman was involved in the domestic violence movement with La Casa de las Madres. Others were involved in student organizing, direct action activism and solidarity work with Third World liberation struggles.

All told, the class had eight people, bringing STORM's membership to fifteen. And when these eight joined, the veterans of RAW became a minority of STORM's membership for the first time.

With this new influx of members, STORM started becoming a more serious force in the Bay Area social justice movement. Members were active in many sectors of the movement – from the women's movement to the labor movement to the community-organizing world to the direct action movement. Fifteen hard-working leaders were intentionally promoting STORM's revolutionary politics in their mass work.



Other left organizations often invited STORM to speak at their events from a radical young people of color perspective. STORM members promoted the organization's politics of solidarity and revolution in a period where much of the Left was feeling demoralized and marginal. STORM was starting to challenge both the Left, which was largely isolated from mass struggles, and the broader mass movement, which was often limited to talking about specific issues instead of larger political analysis.

From the beginning, STORM's impact was felt mostly through its members' individual, independent political work. This would remain true throughout the life of the organization. But early on, STORM also wanted to develop organizational work – what we called “STORM work.”

Once the first class had joined, STORM made its first attempts at independent organizing work by building work groups around different issues. These work groups were the structures through which members engaged in on-the-ground work. These work groups were open not only to STORM members, but non-members also. The first work groups included:

- **Fillmore Standing Together (FiST)** – FiST worked with residents in San Francisco's Plaza East Housing Projects to block the demolition of the projects until the City guaranteed that all of the current tenants would have the opportunity to return once the replacement housing was completed.
- **4REAL** – 4REAL supported the Youth Uprising Coalition, a group of young people who fought and defeated an attempt to impose a curfew on San Francisco youth.
- The **Direct Action Response Team (DART)** – In the summer of 1995, STORM created DART to give itself the capacity to respond to crises and sudden opportunities. STORM first activated DART to support UC Berkeley students organizing against the elimination of affirmative action at their school.

These projects provided STORM's first lessons about its external work. FiST represented STORM's first attempt at direct organizing in working class communities. Through FiST, STORM organized a community event in the housing project that was slated to be demolished. We held

regular meetings with the Tenants' Association. And we produced an agitational leaflet that we covertly distributed to public housing activists at a HUD-sponsored conference held in San Francisco.

Still, FiST faltered as STORM members failed to follow through on their commitments. Eventually, FiST was out-organized by a city bureaucrat. STORM was struggling in its transition from direct action activism to systematic organizing. It became clear that we could not organize as a hobby. If we were serious about organizing in working class communities of color, we would have to invest a considerable amount of resources to do it.

4REAL and DART were not organizing projects. Rather, they were attempts by STORM members to provide political leadership training and technical assistance to activists engaged in crisis-driven mobilizations and direct action. STORM members met with much more success here, developing lasting relationships with youth activists that have become integral parts of today's network of left and progressive organizations in the Bay Area. But both work groups struggled to maintain clarity regarding their relationship to STORM. Members came up against tough questions about whether supporting other organizations could rightly be considered “STORM work” and how it helped to advance STORM's vision.

Underlying all of this early activity was the group's difficulty in deciding how and when to take up work. There was a lot of important and pressing work, and many opportunities to get involved. Without a systematic revolutionary strategy to guide us, we were often in a “crisis response” mode. We quickly found ourselves – and the organization's limited resources – stretched very thin.

## 1995: Crisis

Sadly, we didn't have much of an opportunity to apply those early lessons. In the fall of 1995, a crisis hit STORM that quickly forced the group to dissolve all of its work projects.



### **Serious Allegations Hit a Leading Member of STORM**

An ex-partner, a woman of color, alleged that one of STORM's leaders, a man of color, had physically abused her during their relationship. She distributed a letter about these alleged abuses throughout the movement. The accused member denied these allegations.

She brought together a group of 30 people to publicly confront the accused member. Most of the people in this group were her friends and classmates – who were mostly white and who had little relationship with the accused member. But it also included several STORM members.

This intervention never happened. But the accusation, coupled with the involvement of STORM members in planning the public confrontation, left STORM to handle a series of incredibly deep political challenges – challenges that the movement had no good models for dealing with.

First, we had to respond to the accusations. Given our feminist politics, we had to take them seriously. If they were true, the organization would need to seriously discipline, even expel, the accused member. But we also had to guard against the long histories both of false accusations against men of color and of attacks on political leaders by the government and other political opposition. We had to determine the truth.

Second, we had to deal with the fact that several members of STORM took part in planning the confrontation. This violated the organization's Codes of Conduct, which required members to investigate accusations and to communicate directly with other members about conflicts.

### **STORM Investigates Allegations**

STORM froze all of its external work to devote its resources to addressing the allegations. The group launched an investigation. The investigation was led by members who were active on feminist issues and by survivors of domestic violence. The group wanted a clear and objective account of the facts so it could determine an appropriate response. Both the accused member and the woman agreed to participate in the group's investigation.

The investigation lasted six months. It included nearly 1200 hours of interviews and discussions, including interviews with the woman. STORM also pulled together a series of public meetings to solicit feedback about our process, to get information about the situation and, after it was finished, to share the results of the investigation.

Outside of STORM's investigation and public meetings, rumors that the allegations were true – and that STORM's investigation process was set up to protect its member – were spreading rapidly throughout the movement. Within the group, conflicts were developing about the conduct of the members who had helped to plan the confrontation. This was a draining period, and many members left the organization.

In the end, the investigation team concluded that the allegations in the letter were false and that the member had been falsely targeted for attack. During the investigation, the woman had recanted her most serious charges. They also concluded that several members had engaged in unprincipled conduct by organizing the intervention without investigating the truth of the accusation.

### **The Aftermath**

This incident had a huge impact on STORM. Despite the resources it put into the investigation, STORM's credibility and reputation were seriously damaged. Not everyone in the movement believed the investigation's results. After all, the domestic violence movement had struggled for a long time to advance the principle that the woman should always be believed in questions of domestic abuse. Some people external to the group dismissed the results of the investigation. They alleged that STORM was lying and covering up the truth to protect its member. Some questioned STORM's commitment to "Sisters at the Center." Women members, in particular, faced doubt from outside the organization as to their commitment to revolutionary feminism.

There were serious internal ramifications as well. The crisis deeply impacted the targeted member emotionally. It also undermined his political reputation. He continues to deal with suspicion stemming from the allegations to this day. Many other members were similarly impacted. They suffered a great deal of stress and emotional pain from the incident. And their reputations were damaged, too.



The conduct of the members who had organized the confrontation created a serious loss of trust – and intense struggle – within the group. This political struggle fell out in part between anarchists and communists in the group. Two anarchist members had been key in organizing the confrontation. Communists in STORM argued that they should have used the group’s internal discipline mechanisms instead. The two members countered that the severity of the allegations justified their decision to sidestep STORM’s agreed-upon process.

Ultimately, these two members left STORM. They did not participate in group accountability processes or discipline mechanisms.

With their departure, there were no longer any members explicitly promoting anarchist politics within STORM. But ideologically committed communists remained active in the group. This, coupled with the primary leadership role that the group’s most committed reds had played in leading the organization through this crisis, contributed to a decided shift within the group towards Marxist politics. For many STORM members, the integrity of the investigation was proof of the usefulness of Marxist tools (e.g., Mao’s principle of “No investigation, no right to speak.”) in solving real-life problems.

STORM’s organizational unity also suffered from the emotional and political stress of the situation. Fatigue and confusion over how to deal with such a serious accusation in a fair and principled way led to intense, emotional struggles in meetings. In some very important ways, STORM, its members and its members’ relationships with one another were forever scarred by this experience.

Having determined that the allegations were false, we wanted the crisis to be over. Hoping to make it go away, we chose to limit internal dialogue and discontinue public discussion about the incident. We explained it only briefly to future members. This undermined the ability of our organization, our members and the movement to heal from the trauma of the incident or to draw solid political conclusions. Members did not thoroughly discuss this incident until the writing of this document. And without adequate political clarity, we could not share our lessons from these experiences with the broader movement.

This crisis left permanent marks on STORM’s organizational culture and practice. In response to this attack, members developed a “bunker mentality,” acting as if the organization and its leadership were under constant threat of attack. This left us unable to hear valid, constructive criticism. Indeed, many members trace the group’s culture of defensiveness, which would hamper our work for years, back to this period.

For STORM, this crisis marked the beginning of a contradictory relationship to revolutionary feminism. When women in the group challenged their male comrades alleging sexist behavior, the organization was torn about how to respond. Some members were quick to uphold these challenges as legitimate feminist critiques. Others were wary of them and quick to defend leaders from what they feared were veiled and unprincipled attacks. Unfortunately, some members falsely assumed that feminist critiques of male leaders of color are, more often than not, manifestations of a racist form of feminism, representing unprincipled attacks on leadership.

Regrettably, STORM was not always clear on this question. We struggled intensely within the organization about what feminist practice should look like. In hindsight, we should have reflected on the entire incident, sorted through our difficult experiences and developed collective clarity on what it meant to have principled struggle towards a true feminist practice.

After an intense year and a half of struggling with the crisis, six members remained in STORM. These six had to decide whether to close up shop or move ahead, carrying the emotional and political baggage from the crisis. We chose to move ahead.

Our return to external work was difficult. At first, we looked into running a campaign calling on a popular hip-hop radio station to end its misogynist programming. But we couldn’t move that campaign forward. Instead, we held an action in Oakland protesting President Bill Clinton because of his decision to gut welfare. The action flopped. Only two dozen people – and no media – came. Clinton didn’t even show up. At the end of 1996, STORM was in a quandary regarding its future, its role, its purpose and the camaraderie among its members.

## 1997: Re-Grounding & Rectification

At the beginning of 1997, STORM began a “rectification” process.\* We were still struggling to regain our pre-crisis sense of camaraderie and collective purpose. The goals of this rectification were: 1) rebuild our political and personal unity and 2) make a definite collective shift towards communist politics.

### Bringing In the Next Class

In the spring of 1997, STORM brought in a small class of three. All three had worked closely with our work groups before we shut them down in the fall of 1995. One was a Marxist theoretician who had been in RAW. Another was a student organizer from UC Berkeley who was involved in the efforts to save affirmative action and a founder of the School of Unity & Liberation (SOUL), a Bay Area youth movement training center. The other was a local hip-hop cultural worker and a member of the (((Local 1200))) DJ crew, an important force in the Bay Area’s political hip-hop scene. STORM now had nine members.

### Rectification Study

We spent the next six months studying together. We tried to draw out the strengths and limitations of different forms of organizing. We contrasted Alinsky organizing models, SNCC’s grassroots model and Marxist-Leninist methods of mass work. We worked to develop a basic understanding of Marxist and Leninist histories, theories and politics. Members also worked to identify the features of the current historical period and discussed what it would take to build towards a revolutionary period.

Outside of the organization, a group of movement veterans, intrigued by STORM’s interest in Marxist politics, organized a series of study groups. STORM members, along with other young leftists, thus got a chance to study Marx’s critique of capitalism and revolutionary strategy together with trained communists.

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\* “Rectification” is a term used in the communist tradition to describe an organizational effort to get back on track, to rectify past errors

This rectification was an important period in STORM’s political development and consolidation. All of STORM’s members developed a basic understanding of and commitment to revolutionary Marxist politics – with a particular emphasis on the historical experiences of Third World communist movements. Our understanding of these politics and histories, though still relatively crude, was extremely significant in the development of our work. For the first time, STORM had a shared ideological framework, giving us a common basis for developing our political analysis, our structure and our program.

During this time, we developed our analysis of and approach to the current historical period. We came to believe that the central role of revolutionaries today is to help build “resistance struggles” in oppressed communities around immediate reform issues and to use this resistance work to lay the groundwork for the development of a more clearly revolutionary struggle. We called this approach “Moving From Resistance to Revolution.” See “*STORM’s Politics*” for a more thorough discussion of these points.

### Applying the Lessons of Rectification

We now believed that revolutionary Marxist politics would be central to the development of a successful liberation movement in this country. We also thought that we needed to build an organization that maintained its commitment to these politics.

But our new political commitment to Marxist-Leninist politics raised many questions about our structure and potential for relevance and growth. Most young activists around us – particularly women and people of color – were hostile to revolutionary Marxism. Would new members undermine our new political unity and commitment to red politics? Would there be political differences too large to resolve without divisive struggle and destructive arguments?

Looking around us, we didn’t think it was possible to build an explicitly Marxist organization. And after the previous period of division and power struggles, it seemed risky to bring new people into our but recently – and delicately – cohered group.

To deal with these issues, STORM adopted a two-tiered member-

## **4II: Political Education Committee**

In 1998, STORM created 4II. For the first time, STORM had a formal committee in charge of providing structured training for both the Core and the General Membership. 4II was also responsible for orienting new members. 4II was important in collectivizing STORM's commitment to Marxist politics.

4II facilitated political education trainings in every membership meeting. It also conducted bi-monthly weekend "intensives." We began with Marxist "basics," laying a foundation on which to build an understanding of Third World communism. We studied philosophy, wage exploitation, capitalism, imperialism and globalization, Lenin's theories of the state, revolution and the party, and the political ideas of Mao Tse-tung and Antonio Gramsci.

Later sessions covered more "contemporary" issues, including Marxist feminism, transgender liberation, and the Palestinian liberation struggle. We continued to study the Marxist tradition, including dialectical materialism and member-initiated studies of Mao's "On Practice" and "On Contradiction". We also had skills trainings (e.g., revolutionary organizing, self-care for cadre, evaluation). Members were also expected to attend SOUL's Revolutionary Sunday Schools to study the history of Third World revolutions.

STORM's methodological approach to political education was distinct. To make the material more accessible to our members, 4II used interactive methods rather than traditional left study methods like reading and lecture.

In general, members had a low level of discipline with regards to political education. They often failed to read. Attendance at in-depth training sessions, held outside of meetings, was inconsistent. Members were busy in their mass work, leaving little time to schedule adequate training sessions.

We devoted what time we had to learning basic concepts. We rarely got beyond interactive, but often shallow, pedagogical methods and tools. As a result, members often developed only a crude understanding (sometimes not much deeper than a slogan) of complicated political ideas.

4II designed these trainings and workshops as introductions to the basics of different political theories. But these introductory sessions were the only spaces within STORM for political discussion. This left more advanced members with virtually no organizational time or space for deeper, more nuanced study or discussion. It also left members with little opportunity to discuss the material's applicability to their mass work. This lack of deeper discussion became a problem for STORM's political development.

ship structure with a leadership "Core" and a "General Membership." All Core Members had to be explicitly committed to revolutionary Marxist politics. General Members did not, although they could not be hostile to red politics either. Instead, General Members had only to support STORM's Points of Unity, which were not explicitly Marxist.

## **1998: Re-Emergence**

Though the organization had frozen all external work in the fall of 1995, STORM members continued to engage in movement work. But we did so as individuals, not as representatives of STORM. Members were still involved in labor organizing, youth and student organizing and community organizing work. Drawing on their newfound political clarity, STORM members were playing increasingly visible leadership roles in these movements. The people in STORM at this point would be seen as the group's primary public face for most of its remaining years.

### **Members Continue to Build Important Organizations**

STORM members were building organizations that were growing and becoming important forces in the movement in their own right. STORM never organizationally directed or intervened in the work of these organizations. But, because STORM members founded and led them, they came to be seen as "STORM-affiliated." Furthermore, these projects promoted politics quite similar to – indeed, at times indistinguishable from – STORM's.

For example, Bay Area PoliceWatch was expanding to become the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (EBC). EBC would go on to sponsor some of the Bay Area's most important projects fighting against state repression.

As San Francisco was forcing its General Assistance recipients into the forced labor of "workfare," the General Assistance Rights Union was evolving into POWER – People Organized to Win Employment Rights. A union of no- and low-wage workers in San Francisco, POWER was now organizing its members as workers instead of as public assistance recipients.

SOUL began as a summer organizing training program for college student activists. Now it was growing into a year-round training center for the Bay Area youth and student movement. And it was beginning to create a space for young revolutionaries to come together to study and develop a shared vision.

### **Stepping Out Again – STORM Re-Emerges**

As rectification wrapped up in the fall of 1997, the group decided to reengage in collective, organizational work. It was time to move beyond our work as individual revolutionaries.

We decided that our first project would be to support the affirmative action student movement at UC Berkeley. One STORM member was already actively involved in this struggle as a student activist. As an organization, STORM began to provide political education and organizing training to student organizers.

All members recognized that working with student activists at UC Berkeley (UCB) didn't reflect our commitment to building power in working-class communities of color. But we also knew that we didn't yet have the capacity to organize in these communities. We debated whether or not working on UCB's campus was a sound step strategically. Several members feared that student work would push us in an irreversibly petit bourgeois (i.e., middle class) direction because of the elite nature of this campus. Other members were concerned that we might get too comfortable doing student and youth work and never transition to organizing in working class communities.

In the end, we decided to support this student movement because it was a familiar arena where we had close ties with key leaders and because it was a low-risk place to get our feet wet. Knowing that many of the student leaders shared our commitment to Third World revolutionary politics and the leadership of women of color, we also hoped to recruit new members, giving us the resources begin organizing with working class people.

### **STORM's First Core, First General Membership**

We got to know a number of student leaders at this time. We invited seven of them to join STORM. All were leading members of the Student

of Color Solidarity Council, a coalition of student of color organizations on campus. They joined STORM as General Members. The seven members who had been in the organization during the rectification became STORM's first Core.

STORM now had fourteen members: seven Core members and seven General Members. Most of these new members were in their last year of school, and the time-strapped STORM members were hopeful that they would make STORM work their main political priority after graduation. After graduation, these members went on to work with many different organizations – including POWER, SOUL, St. Peter's Housing Committee and the Coalition on Homelessness. One became a teacher in Oakland's public school system.

### **Continuing to Learn**

STORM continued its political development through study, particularly of the Third World communist tradition. In January 1998, we studied No Fist is Big Enough to Hide the Sky, a history of the national liberation movement in Guinea-Bissau. This study proved a big influence on STORM's politics. We were impressed by the work of Amilcar Cabral and the African Party of Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC). These African revolutionaries emphasized democracy, cultural work, "class suicide"\* and the importance of being rooted in oppressed communities.

In July 1998, three Core Members went to South Africa to attend the Congress of the South African Communist Party (SACP). The Congress was crucial in solidifying these three members' commitment to Third World Marxist politics. At the Congress, they saw hundreds of working class Africans who proudly called themselves Marxists and who were deeply engaged in serious political struggle. We saw how powerful Marxism has been and can be for liberation movements made up of and led by people of color.

This was in stark contrast to the experience of most members prior

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\* *The concept that middle class revolutionaries should discard their class status and immerse themselves in working class communities.*



to the Congress, who had encountered only white Marxists in the U.S. opportunistically selling newspapers at the events that we had worked to organize. When the three Core Members came back, they were ready to help STORM deepen its red politics and to promote those politics throughout the movement.

### **Rewriting the Points of Unity & Constitution**

With a growing membership and a growing commitment to Marxist politics, STORM began rewriting our Points of Unity and Constitution. The resulting documents signaled a clear commitment to communist politics, drawing primarily from the traditions of Third World Marxism.

Our new Points of Unity represented an unorthodox, and somewhat eclectic, form of Marxism. We drew on the strengths of the communist tradition while challenging it to place a greater priority on gender, race, democracy and mass organizing. Specifically, we upheld revolutionary democracy, revolutionary feminism, revolutionary internationalism, the central role of the working class, urban Marxism and Third World Communism. The new Points of Unity highlighted what we considered to be the three main tasks facing revolutionaries in this period: (1) building an advance-guard organization; (2) promoting revolutionary ideas; and (3) building revolutionary people's power. See "STORM's Politics" for more information.

Our new Constitution maintained many features of the first, but also contained some substantial changes. We still had a closed membership, race and gender quotas for new classes, the mediation team and consensus-based decision-making. But we also codified the Core/General membership structure – a radical departure from STORM's original design as a flat revolutionary collective with no defined political leadership body. The new structure created a Marxist-committed Core within a broadly revolutionary General Membership. We did this to maintain the centrality and leadership of revolutionary Marxism while making space for revolutionaries of all stripes to join and participate in STORM's General Membership.

Using this two-tiered structure, STORM developed its first clear division of labor and decision-making power. We assigned responsibility

for decisions related to our line (i.e., our analysis) to the Core. The General Membership had responsibility for decisions related to our program (i.e., our practical work).

At this point, we also created a Coordinating Committee (CC) to handle STORM's administrative needs. The four members of the CC were selected from and by the Core. Along with the CC, we established 411, an ongoing committee in charge of political education for the group. 411 contained both Core Members and General Members. See "STORM's Structure" for more detailed information.

### **STORM's New Work Groups**

After adopting our new Constitution and Points of Unity, STORM was poised to end our long absence from serious mass work. Instead of deciding on one project, we decided to initiate four Work Groups that reflected the sectors of movement work in which STORM members were already active:

- **Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM)**  
*(pronounced like "rhyme")*
- **Workers Organized to Rid us of Capitalism (WORC)**
- **Culture & Propaganda**
- **Theory Development**

We designed these Work Groups to give members a space to discuss how we were carrying out the group's general strategy of "promoting revolutionary ideas" and "building revolutionary people's power." See the Work Group Descriptions for a narrative of STORM's external work in these areas.

### **The Beginnings of a National Network**

The Critical Resistance (CR) conference in 1998 proved an important moment in STORM's development. At the conference, STORM met many of our political peers from across the country. We met comrades from the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM) in New York City and young revolutionaries from Boston and Chicago. Meeting other people like us alleviated our feelings of isolation. We began to understand ourselves as part of a developing national political trend of young revolutionary internationalists.



## Workers Organizing to Rid us of Capitalism

Initially named New Labor, WORC (Workers Organizing to Rid us of Capitalism) attempted to develop deeper understandings of the role of labor organizations in revolutionary struggle. It also sought to understand the emerging sector of no-wage and low-wage, hyper-exploited workers in the United States.

WORC engaged in two primary activities: internal study; and building bridges between STORM and POWER, an independent, worker organization in San Francisco which a STORM member had helped to found.

WORC's study concerned three main subjects: 1) the role of labor organizations in a revolutionary movement, 2) assessing the AFL-CIO, and 3) no-wage and low-wage workers as an emerging sector. WORC developed an annotated bibliography to guide its study. WORC then studied these questions over the course of a year.

The Work Group also did an in-depth case study on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). WORC periodically led STORM's General Membership through trainings to explore some of its conclusions.

WORC also met with leaders of POWER in an effort to build a closer working relationship between our two organizations. POWER members conducted an organizing training for STORM on how to do outreach and recruitment in the community. STORM members each committed to do at least two "POWER Hours" of volunteer work a month. This consisted of either doing outreach with POWER members or providing logistical support for POWER's monthly membership meetings. But STORM members' failure to live up to their commitments made the "POWER Hours" program a failure.

## Growing Pains

Though that was an exciting time, it also gave rise to one of our biggest challenges. After years of fruitful collaboration, rifts began to develop between STORM and Olin, a local Xicana/o student organization and one of our strongest allies.

For several years, STORM had supported Olin's work. Several STORM members had long-standing relationships with Olin's leadership. But with our growing membership and new work group structure, STORM was now becoming an independent force in the youth and student movement. A change in our relationship with Olin, which had been one primarily of support, was inevitable. Unfortunately, that change was a heightened level of conflict, not of increased unity.

In 1998, Olin asked STORM to support its "School, not Jails" walkout (scheduled for two days after the CR conference). They asked us to help with strategic planning and security training and to serve as security during the walkout.

In a subsequent fundraising letter, Critical Resistance took credit for the walkout. With two STORM members on CR's Steering Committee, Olin blamed STORM (although those two members had objected to the letter.). CR's Youth Task Force (in which STORM members were also involved) later used pictures from the event in a flyer calling for national walkouts, escalating the conflict.

All of this soured STORM's relationship with Olin. We tried to meet with Olin to resolve these tensions. But resolving conflict was not one of our strong suits. Both organizations made mistakes in these meetings. The meetings didn't diffuse the conflict; they escalated it. Eventually, both organizations decided to take a "cooling-off period" – we just wouldn't interact with each other. The fall out would follow STORM for the rest of our organizational history.

## 1998-1999: Rolling

Despite these new challenges, STORM was entering one of its most active and productive periods. From the end of 1998 through nearly



## Theory Development Work Group

*Among the most pressing challenges for each Marxist generation (and STORM is no exception) is the need to articulate, from each unique historical conjuncture, the revolutionary unity of theory and practice...It is up to us to articulate the generational and historical answers that will make Marxism viable.*

*- from the proposal to form a Theory Development Work Group*

STORM established the Theory Development Work Group to advance and articulate our political line. This Work Group identified STORM's theoretical strengths as our ability to name the major limitations of traditional Marxism-Leninism (e.g., its poor racial and gender analysis, its failed practice in true democracy) and to draw on the histories of liberation movements.

Theory Development also identified STORM's weaknesses. Our knowledge of historical Marxist texts and recent critiques of Marxism was shallow. We tended not to engage critically enough with Marxist theory. In response, Theory Development proposed that we engage in deeper study to help us to develop as well-trained Marxists. We would then be able to engage critically with Marxism and push Marxist theory and practice to the next level.

But the Work Group hit a rough spot in 1998 when STORM's most theoretically developed member left the organization. Following this member's departure, Theory Development felt unable to continue with its proposed work plan.

The Work Group developed an alternative plan. It would document the history of the revolutionary internationalist trend in the Bay Area. After several months of work, Theory Development decided that the project was too large in scope; it could not complete it.

The members of the Work Group concluded that they did not have the capacity to make the Work Group an effective wing of the organization. They proposed that the Work Group temporarily disband and that the Core spend six months studying to 1) deepen its grasp of revolutionary Marxism, 2) identify the areas of theory that a Theory Development Work Group should explore, and 3) identify steps for rebuilding the Work Group. The General Membership disbanded Theory Development in early 2000 despite some anxiety about the potential negative impact on the theoretical development of the organization. STORM never reconstituted this Work Group.

all of 1999, STORM emerged as a centrally important formation in the Bay Area Left. Our members played leading and supporting roles in several critical struggles that broke out during this time period. Our own organizational work was moving forward. We were engaged in more systematic study than ever before. And we were bringing in more members.

## STORM's Crisis Response Work

**The Fight to Free Mumia:** STORM saw political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal as an important voice of resistance and truth for communities of color. We considered the fight to bring him home from Pennsylvania's death row crucial, and were concerned about the absence of people of color from this movement. We were also worried by the lack of strategic thinking and direct action in this fight.

In response, we created the People of Color Task Force to Free Mumia (POCTF). POCTF was an organization designed to engage young people of color in the fight to free Mumia. It organized cultural events that drew connections between Mumia's case and issues here in the Bay Area, like police brutality. It also helped organize people of color contingents at broader Mumia demonstrations. After six months, POCTF became an independent organization, though STORM members continued to play active leadership roles.

**third world Liberation Front:** At UC Berkeley, the third world Liberation Front (twLF) emerged in April of 1999 in response to the administration's efforts to dismantle the school's Ethnic Studies Department. One STORM member, who was a student at the time, played a leading role in the fight. When the fight escalated to an 8-day hunger strike, other STORM members played active support roles and offered legal support.

**Fighting the Corporate Takeover of KPFA:** Berkeley-based KPFA Radio has been a critical left resource for news and information in the Bay Area since the 1960s. In 1999, the corporate-led Pacifica board tried to shut the station down. A broad fight emerged to save KPFA. STORM played an important role in that campaign. We added militancy and people of color-led street tactics to the wider white

mobilizations. The campaign was victorious, stopping the Pacifica Board from selling the radio frequency. In the fight, the younger people of color forces secured Hard Knock Radio, a drive-time radio show produced by and for youth of color.

In 1998 and 1999, STORM participated, often by invitation, in some of the most important struggles in the Bay Area. In all of these mobilizations, we made important contributions – particularly around the importance of direct action, street protest and people of color participation and leadership. But we also made errors. For example, STORM’s confusing relationship with POCTF led to tensions with some POCTF leaders. (This would become a recurring dynamic for the group.) After the twLF hunger strike, some student activists criticized STORM, saying some of our members dominated leadership roles. At the root of many of these errors was our own ambivalence and confusion as to what kind of relationships between STORM and other activist groups we thought were appropriate and desirable. Increasingly, STORM members became uneasy about the amount of resources we put into such “crisis response” work.

### **Trying to Be Strategic – STORM’s Work Groups**

STORM’s more deliberate work – done through our Work Groups – developed at a rapid pace. This was especially true of RYM. With the introduction of Proposition 21 – a racist statewide ballot initiative dismantling the juvenile justice system and throwing minors into adult courts and prisons – the entire youth and student movement kicked into high gear. RYM was no exception.

RYM was one of several important groups working to coordinate an impressive set of direct actions and mobilizations that inspired young people across the country. Members of RYM helped to build the Critical Resistance Youth Task Force (later to become the Youth Force Coalition), the People of Color Task Force to Free Mumia, SOUL (a training center for youth organizers), Third Eye Movement and YACIN (a youth organization at Oakland’s Castlemont High School).

Meanwhile, WORC engaged in an intensive study of the role of organized labor in past revolutionary movements. WORC met with POWER to talk about building a stronger relationship between

## **Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM)**

The main goal of STORM’s RYM (pronounced like “rhyme”) Work Group was to support the development of a revolutionary internationalist trend of youth organizations in the Bay. We formed this Work Group out of recognition of the historical importance of youth and student organizing in revolutionary movements the world over. We also found that young people of color were open to revolutionary politics and a natural base for our work.

RYM was STORM’s largest Work Group, including more than half of all members. Most STORM members had been engaged and playing leading roles in the Bay Area youth movement when they joined the organization.

RYM members were involved in Youth Force Coalition, the People of Color Task Force to Free Mumia (later known as Third Eye Movement 510), Third Eye Movement 415\*, PENCIL (Progressive Educators Network Creating International Liberation), and SOUL (the School Of Unity & Liberation). Indeed, STORM members founded or co-founded all of these organizations. And each played a leading role in the youth and student movement.

Initially, RYM’s program was broad and short on detail: provide political education and skills trainings for youth leaders; build up mass organizations of young People of color; build unity among youth organizations in the Bay Area. We planned to carry these tasks out in a number of different areas, including the fight to free Mumia and the emerging movement against the growing prison-industrial complex.

But the introduction of Proposition 21 – a racist statewide ballot initiative dismantling the juvenile justice system and throwing minors into adult courts and prisons – changed the face of youth organizing in the Bay Area. Almost every youth organization re-oriented their work to fight Prop 21.

This campaign became a major focus for the RYM sector work. All of the organizations in which RYM members were involved – Youth Force Coalition, Third Eye Movement, PENCIL, and SOUL – got involved in this campaign. Our youth work shifted from broad movement-building to helping to build the coherence and militancy of this crucial fight.

During the No on 21 Campaign, “Schools, Not Jails” became a popular demand among Bay Area youth organizations. As young people got excited,

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*\* There were not always STORM members in Third Eye Movement 415. A STORM member helped found Third Eye Movement in 1997, but left the organization a year later. Later, two other STORM members moved to Third Eye Movement 415 from Third Eye Movement 510, of which they had been members beforehand.*

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these organizations' membership and militancy reached new heights. Foreexample, Youth Force Coalition grew into an alliance of more than 30 youth organizations. It coordinated direct actions against the corporate funders of Prop 21 throughout the Bay Area.

The No on 21 Campaign was a powerful fusion of the energy and cultural vibrancy of hip-hop on the one hand and militant direct action organizing on the other. Rallies, protests and cultural events regularly drew hundreds of young People of color.

STORM members brought experience in militant street tactics, revolutionary agitation and coalition-building to this crucial fight. They worked hard to build the various mass organizations that they were members of.

While working hard in their mass organizations, RYM members also met together as a Work Group. RYM members used meetings as a time to draw lessons from their experiences, to assess their organizations and the movement as a whole and to think about how they could strengthen and radicalize the campaign.

RYM's goals for and strategic orientation towards movement-building were broad and general. Individual members were left to determine how to implement these goals on their own.

In time, mass organizations began to criticize RYM for being not being open enough about its internal discussions about the rest of the movement. We were not clear about the relationship between STORM and our mass work. In some cases, this confusion led to suspicion and mistrust.

When the No on 21 Campaign ended, other individuals' and groups' frustrations with STORM came to a head. One example of this dynamic was Third Eye Movement 415's decision to ban anyone with "a political line" from membership in its core. Six youth organizations came to STORM collectively to voice their criticisms. Our inability to resolve these tensions contributed to our eventual decision to dissolve STORM. See "STORM's History" for more a more detailed account of this period.

More than any of our other work, STORM's involvement in the Bay Area's radical youth and student movement illustrates the benefits, complications and questions inherent in the relationship between cadre organizations and broader movements.

POWER and STORM.

The Theory Development Work Group developed a thorough assessment of STORM's theoretical strengths and weaknesses and organized a panel at the Critical Resistance Conference in Berkeley.

The Culture & Propaganda Work Group engaged in a study of the role of cultural work in the revolutionary movement. They studied Cabral, Mao, Gramsci, Fanon and others. They also developed several pieces of propaganda to promote STORM's line, including a widely popular piece on the nature of the prison-industrial complex.

### **STORM Members' Ongoing Individual Political Work**

In addition to their work in crisis-driven mobilizations and in STORM's Work Groups, members continued to do independent work in the movement. As individuals, we remained active in the organizations to which we had belonged before we joined STORM. Most of us were (more than) full-time staff members at radical non-profit organizations. We did additional movement work at nights and on the weekends – our "free time."

This frenetic pace was most extreme for the Core. Collectively, the Core was responsible for STORM's internal functioning and the development of General Members as leaders and revolutionaries. Individually, every Core Member was playing a significant leadership role in the movement. Several were directors of movement non-profit organizations.

This intense level of work, combined with ongoing revolutionary study, allowed STORM members to accomplish quite a lot. Most of us became leaders in our mass work. Our skills and analysis developed rapidly. But we also became exhausted. We often responded defensively to other activists' criticisms, regardless of whether they were valid or misplaced.

### **STORM's Rapid Growth**

The organization grew rapidly over the next year, bringing in two classes. Most of these new members were activists from the youth and student movement. Most were young and had attended college.

## Culture & Propaganda Work Group

The Culture & Propaganda Work Group (CPWG), formed in 1999, was STORM's primary space for promoting revolutionary cultural work and popularizing the organization's line.

This Work Group included a poet, a DJ, two MC's/producers and a graphic designer. Its main objective was "to put a match to the fuse of our generation's revolutionary imagination." CPWG's program had four goals

- 1) to nurture new revolutionary art and artists;
- 2) to produce street level agitation and propaganda;
- 3) to bring cultural workers into political action; and
- 4) to build networks among revolutionary cultural workers.

To meet these goals, CPWG engaged in internal study, led workshops at political events, produced propaganda and organized cultural events that both promoted STORM's line and supported on-the-ground campaigns. CPWG primarily targeted youth and emphasized hip-hop culture.

Members of the Culture & Propaganda Work Group studied the writings of Gramsci, Bertolt Brecht, Mao Tse-Tung, and Amilcar Cabral on the role of cultural workers in the revolutionary movement. They translated their study into workshops on using "culture as a weapon" in the liberation struggle. They conducted these workshops throughout the Bay Area.

CPWG also produced agitational leaflets. The first was a small flyer popularizing the slogan "Sisters at the Center." The second was lengthier, more polished piece called "Land of the Free?" Produced during the No on Prop 21 Campaign, this piece exposed the racism of the criminal justice system as a product of capitalism. This leaflet was widely distributed, even by people outside of STORM. CPWG also produced a bilingual leaflet and companion sticker critiquing U.S. "democracy" and the two-party system.

At times, CPWG worked with other organizations to host political hip-hop events in Oakland. In STORM's last year, they also convened a group of revolutionary poets who took the name "Chant Down Babylon." This group organized several successful poetry/political education events, but ultimately dissolved as STORM headed into rectification in 2002.

The first class was small. It was made up of leaders from Underground Railroad (an organization of local young revolutionary cultural workers), the Center for Young Women's Development (an organization of young women who lived and worked on the streets of San Francisco) and TransAction (an organization of transgender people and allies who organized against police abuse of transgender people in San Francisco).

Most of the people in the second class had been involved in the People of Color Task Force to Free Mumia and had then branched out to other youth organizing projects, including Third Eye Movement, YACIN and the Youth Force Coalition. This class also included two organizers who were active in worker organizing to win a Living Wage in the East Bay.

This influx of new members meant that STORM's impact and influence on the youth and student and labor movements continued grow. Leaders in those movements were now being shaped by STORM's analysis and activity, as STORM was being shaped by their experiences in their organizing work.

But if we were successfully recruiting some of the "best and brightest" activists around, we were not recruiting well from working class communities. Our new members were mostly middle class and college-educated – a reflection of our programmatic emphasis on work with these populations. This brought into sharp relief our need to develop a plan to "proletarianize" – to move from a primarily middle class membership to a more working class membership.

## Orientation & Political Education

For the first time, we took new members through a structured orientation process. Our ability to do this reflected a new level of internal cohesion and clarity about our work and our politics. We were no longer just telling new members to "figure it out." We were presenting and discussing the basic conclusions we had reached in the Points of Unity.

In addition to the initial orientation sessions for new members, 411 began running structured political education for its members at this

point. Every meeting contained a political training. And 411 organized bi-monthly weekend “intensives” to help members develop an understanding of the basics of Marxist politics.

In its first year, 411 trained members on capitalism and wage exploitation, the state and revolution, imperialism and the revolutionary party. These sessions helped most STORM members to overcome their initial negative reaction to Marxist politics. We found that the Marxist tradition provided helpful tools for our movement work.

These political education sessions became one of the only spaces in STORM for our members to engage in political discussions. This became a problem because the trainings were introductory and basic. They were not designed to facilitate exploration and debate of the complexities, nuances and applications of these ideas – which is exactly what more advanced members needed and wanted. Though trainers often assigned texts, those texts were not the basis of the in-meeting discussions. Instead, the training sessions were usually based on a workshop model – highly interactive and based on the members’ experiences.

One of the most formative “political education sessions” of this period was a group trip to Cuba in the summer of 1999. Several STORM members participated in the Venceremos Brigade to see and support one of the world’s few surviving socialist states. Members came back with a heightened understanding of both socialism and capitalism and a stronger commitment to red politics.

### **1999-2000: Clouds Start to Form**

In the midst of STORM’s rapid expansion and many accomplishments, there were also warning signs of trouble that would erupt in the following year. The Core distributed an internal memo noting four challenges facing the group as our membership and work expanded:

1. The resignation of a Core Member over political differences with the growing Maoist orientation within STORM. Since this member was also STORM’s most-

developed theoretician, this resignation reduced the organization’s ability to understand and develop revolutionary political theory.

2. Tensions stemming from dating relationships within the membership. Such tensions were creating significant stresses on personal unity within the group.
3. Confusion and mistrust that had developed within both POCTF and Olin. Our relationships were becoming strained with two of our closest ally organizations.
4. Exhaustion and poor health among STORM’s most active members. Physical and emotional fatigue were both widespread, particularly within the Core.

The memo encouraged members to be more generous with comrades both within the group and outside the group. Members should communicate better and more often with one another. And members should listen for the valuable lessons in other activists’ criticisms of the group.

Nevertheless, a level of defensiveness and impatience with people who criticized STORM remained. Ultimately, this defensiveness clouded our ability to take stock of the very real problems developing in our work. These problems would come more strongly to the forefront in the next year.

### **Continued Growth – STORM’s Final Class**

We brought in our last class during this period. Most of these new members had been active in the youth and student movement to defeat Proposition 21. They had helped to build several of the organizations that led that fight, including C-Beyond, the Youth Force Coalition and Third Eye Movement. One member of this class was also deeply involved in organizing the direct action protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle.

### **Deepening and Expanding Our Local Work**

STORM continued to be engaged in a high level of mass work through the work sectors.

## Was STORM Trying to Control Other Organizations and Run the Movement?

People outside of STORM sometimes asked if, and often suspected that, STORM was trying to control other organizations and the movement as a whole. The short answer to these concerns is, “No, we were not.” But this is a complicated and important question. It is a larger political question about cadre organization with significance beyond STORM’s experience.

How do revolutionaries intentionally advance a revolutionary agenda without dominating the democratic development of the movement? To abandon an intentional agenda would be to give up revolution, to fall into spontaneity and reformism. But to sacrifice the movement as a whole to the interests of one organization, cadre organization or not, is foolish and destructive.

STORM did have an agenda. We wanted to help lay the groundwork for a revolutionary period. We believed we could make several contributions in this area. We could help develop a broad liberation movement. We could build strong organizations (and therefore power) in oppressed communities. We could promote revolutionary politics and ideas. And we could help women of color develop into movement leaders.

Within STORM, members discussed the mass organizations we worked in to help us develop an assessment and an analysis of the state of the movement. We also set broad strategic goals for our work, like promoting direct action or building united fronts. Our objective was to influence – but not control – the direction of the movement. We wanted to support the development of mass organizations, not to determine their day-to-day decisions.

In the end, STORM had a huge impact on the movement. STORM members were (and our former members continue to be) key leaders in important social struggles in the Bay Area. Particularly in the youth and student movement, the organizations we helped to build continue to thrive and revolutionary internationalist politics have become widespread among them.

We made real mistakes along the way. Without a clear strategy, we were unable to communicate with other organizations about our agenda. STORM rarely had clear, front-end conversations with allied organizations to formalize our relationship. This often led to confusion and tensions. Many members had poor individual practice in their mass work, including being overly controlling and disrespectful of other movement leaders. Such individual errors by members often created the illusion that STORM was organizationally trying to call the shots. These are real errors that revolutionaries should guard against as we learn how to be conscious forces within broad movements.

WORC began to sketch out plans for a Bay Area-wide Workers Center. The idea was to create an explicitly political worker organizing collective that would include workers from various sectors of the workforce. The Workers Center would build mass organizations of low- and no-wage workers. It would also develop individual workers as revolutionary leaders.

Culture & Propaganda continued to provide a public face for STORM with written and visual agitation and propaganda. The Work Group produced pieces promoting STORM’s line on, among other questions, revolutionary feminism and the role of the bourgeois state (the latter designed specifically for the protests at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles). Culture & Propaganda also deepened its study, participating in joint reading and discussion sessions with Underground Railroad on the role of culture in revolutionary movements. Finally, Culture & Propaganda initiated “Chant Down Babylon,” an ongoing STORM-sponsored poetry event that provided a space for radical and revolutionary poets to share their work.

In our on-the-ground work, STORM continued to work primarily with young people and students. This work, in the context of the fight against Proposition 21, had really taken off. RYM members were deeply immersed throughout the Bay Area youth movement, playing leading roles in the Youth Force Coalition, Third Eye Movement 415 and Third Eye Movement 510,\* PENCIL (Progressive Educator’s Network Creating International Liberation, a radical teacher’s collective) and SOUL.

The fight against Prop 21 reached its height in the weeks leading up to the March 2000 election. Demonstrations drew several thousand young people. Militant direct action and civil disobedience were becoming familiar, even commonplace, to young people of color activists. A week and a half before the election, young people occupied a local high school overnight. The day after Prop 21 passed, more than a hundred

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\* *The People of Color Task Force to Free Mumia had joined San Francisco-based youth organization Third Eye Movement and become its Oakland chapter, Third Eye Movement 510.*



young people were arrested as they occupied the plush lobby of the San Francisco Hilton, which had supported Proposition 21 financially.

In addition to our work sector work, STORM also convened a “Sisters at the Center” brunch in celebration of International Women’s Day in 2000. The brunch created a space for women of color to discuss the issues they face in the movement, like sexist dynamics in the movement and the need for the need for childcare to create spaces for mothers’ participation. It brought together women working in various sectors of the movement – welfare rights, youth work, the prison industrial complex, housing rights and cultural work. The participants appreciated the space to talk explicitly about the issues they faced in their work.

### **STORM Becomes a Player in the National Left**

Around this time, STORM began to play a significant role in the national Left. Coming out of the protests against the WTO in Seattle in 1999, we had a stronger sense than ever that we were part of a growing national trend. Several STORM members had participated in those protests and had met there with the Brown Collective in Seattle and other revolutionaries from across the country.

When they got home, STORM started to plan a national gathering to bring these young people of color activists together. We thought that this emerging national trend could become a more coherent national political force, an expression of the hope and momentum of the moment.

Hoping to continue to build a relationship with these forces, several members went to the Washington, D.C. protests against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in April. In August, we sent an organizational contingent to the protests at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles.

Our experiences in Seattle, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles helped us build personal, political and organizational unity with many young people of color leftists across the country. They also gave us an unprecedented opportunity to be in the streets with thousands of protestors from many different organizations and political affiliations. We came away from these demonstrations with a new sense of the power and

potential of massive popular protest.

### **Continuing Political Education**

By now, almost all of STORM’s members (Core and General) were committed to Marxist politics. This was a significant development. Just a year earlier, the Core alone was explicitly committed to Marxism. Members increasingly wanted to engage more deeply and critically with the Marxist tradition.

The group continued to engage in study of the basics of Marxism, including dialectical materialism and a group reading of Mao’s “On Practice” and “On Contradiction.” We also pushed at or went beyond the limits of the traditional Marxist canon, studying such topics as revolutionary feminism, the Palestinian liberation struggle, transgender liberation, methods of evaluation, self-care for cadre and revolutionary mass organizing.

### **Running Up against Our Limits: STORM’s Lack of Strategy Becomes a Major Problem**

We were working hard and making important contributions. But we were also making mistakes. Too often, we met constructive criticism with defensiveness. When working in mass organizations, STORM members would sometimes be commandist, trying to lead other activists in directions that they did not want, or were not politically prepared, to go. Other times, members would be tailist, failing to challenge a mass organization if it moved in a backwards direction.

Our members often used (or misused) revolutionary jargon that had been introduced in training sessions, but that they didn’t really understand. Such jargon served only to alienate members from other activists without pushing the discussion forward.

As we examined these and other errors, we saw many causes for them. We saw two factors as especially crucial. First, we were exhausted, and it was beginning to show. Members were stretched too thin, and were not performing as well or as skillfully as we might have otherwise.

Second, the expansion and deepening of our work made it increasingly obvious that we lacked a strategy sufficient to guide our work as revo-



lutionaries. We had come up against the limits of our “Moving From Resistance to Revolution” framework. We needed a more thorough revolutionary strategy.

## **2001-2003: Crisis & Dissolution**

Towards the end of 2000, General Members started to express concerns that Core Members were not politically developed enough to fulfill their Constitutional obligation to lead the organization ideologically. When one of the founders (a leading member within the Core) went on leave from the organization, concerns about the Core’s ability to lead the group intensified within both the Core and the General Membership. His absence left a noticeable leadership vacuum that would be difficult to fill.

Ultimately, the organization was not able to respond to the challenges of this period. 2001-2003 was a time of crisis from which STORM never emerged.

### **External Criticisms Bring Internal Tensions to the Forefront**

Internal tensions within STORM began to come into sharp relief when the group faced critical feedback from youth organizations with which we had worked in the campaign to defeat Proposition 21.

Many activists and organizations in the youth and student movement were crushed when, despite their valiant efforts, California voters approved Proposition 21. Their post-election evaluations surfaced concerns about STORM members’ prominent role in the campaign. STORM members had played leading roles in many of the key organizations in the fight.

In the next few months, representatives of six leading youth organizations met to discuss STORM’s role in the movement and to plan a feedback session for STORM. They identified ways in which STORM members had helped the growth of the youth movement (e.g., bringing and building skills, helping found organizations, supporting young activists as they worked and learned). They also highlighted problems

with STORM’s participation – STORM’s lack of transparency, the lack of clear feedback mechanisms for other organizations – that STORM had internal conversations that then had outside impacts on the movement.

These criticisms were very similar to those that STORM had made of itself in its own evaluations. Still, members often felt frustrated and confused by both the content of the criticisms and the way they were communicated. STORM’s General Members had been the most deeply involved in the youth work. They bore the brunt of the criticism and were the most hurt by them.

The stress and emotional hurt coming out of these meetings with other groups heightened the organization’s frustration, especially among General Members, with STORM’s internal issues of leadership, democracy, lack of strategy, theoretical underdevelopment, demanding organizational culture and poor practice in the movement.

### **The Core Tries to Respond**

The General Members demanded that the Core develop answers. In response, the Core began an internal planning process to help the group address its internal issues. But almost as soon that process began, another crisis erupted that diverted the Core’s attention.

A series of romantic relationships involving a few members of the organization, including one active Core Member and the Core Member who had just gone on leave, turned into a major crisis for the organization. The on-leave Core Member made his leave permanent. This crisis caused tensions between some core members.

When it returned to its efforts to develop a plan for the group, the Core eventually agreed that STORM faced two main problems: the lack of an adequate strategic framework and members’ need to develop a better practice in their mass work. But the Core could not agree on how to address these problems.

Some in the Core thought that the group should prioritize theoretical study. Others thought that the group should prioritize reflection on and engagement in mass work during this difficult period. The Core was



also divided over whether the group should begin to develop a more comprehensive strategy by studying materialist dialectics or by studying historical revolutionary strategies. The gridlock – uncharacteristic for a Core that had always been able to work through its differences – was a reflection of both political differences over the organization’s direction and the interpersonal differences that had developed during the most recent crisis.

### **Dissension**

The Core was not the only grouping talking about these problems. Many General Members were starting to raise concerns, but different members dealt with their concerns differently. Several members, primarily from the General Membership, began to meet outside of organizational meetings to discuss their growing critiques of the group. A former member who had significant criticisms of the group influenced these conversations. These critiques revolved primarily around concerns about STORM’s method of work and problematic culture.

These members placed responsibility for these problems on the Core (and particularly on the worker organizers in the Core) because they believed that the Core had modeled the problems in STORM’s method of work. They also didn’t think that the Core was taking STORM’s internal problems seriously enough. The Core, they thought, was out of touch with the majority of the General Membership.

These members explicitly decided to not communicate their critiques directly – either with the members they were critiquing or with the membership as whole. This decision, a violation of the organization’s Codes of Conduct, made dialogue and resolution difficult.

These various conflicts – some open, some latent – among different members and groups of members led to a growing climate of frustration, factionalism and distrust in the organization. This made it nearly impossible for us to successfully resolve the group’s internal challenges.

### **The January 2001 Organizational Advance**

These critiques and tensions became more apparent as STORM started to plan for its January 2001 Organizational Advance. The

Advance Planning Committee included Core and General Members. Core members on both sides of the intra-Core conflict were on the committee, as were several of the General Members who were raising the strongest critiques.

The committee discussed many of the concerns and criticisms that were coming up at all levels of the organization. They developed an agenda that would walk the entire group through a collective process of assessing STORM’s line and strategy, our program, our organizational culture and practice and our organizational structure.

During this advance, the membership agreed that STORM needed to make some radical changes in order to fully address the challenges we were facing. Such changes were also necessary to demonstrate to the movement that we were serious about fixing our errors.

### **STORM Enters Its Second Rectification Period**

We decided to enter into our second “rectification” period to correct these problems. We would suspend all STORM work during this period and devote all our organizational energy to addressing our errors and putting the group back on track. (Members would, however, continue their individual movement work.) During rectification, we wanted to answer the following four questions:

- *What is the appropriate role of a cadre organization in this period?*
- *What should STORM’s role and tasks be in the larger movement?*
- *How should we structure STORM to most effectively play that role?*
- *What would a healthy organizational culture and principled practice look like for STORM, both internally and externally?*

The membership reorganized into four new “task forces” to carry the organization through the process of answering these questions:

- **Lay of the Land Task Force:** charged with developing an assessment of the organized forces in the Bay



- Area radical movement.
- **Political and Social Economy Task Force:** charged with developing an understanding and analysis of the political economy of the Bay Area.
- **411 Committee:** charged with leading the group through study on topics relevant to rectification (e.g., different ideological trends, revolutionary strategy, the mass line).
- **Organizational Culture and Practice Task Force:** charged with leading organizational discussions about how to build a healthy culture and practice in an organization of people from many different oppressed communities.

The leadership structure of the group changed during this period as well. Ongoing struggles between Core and General Members left the Core feeling unable to effectively lead. The Core stepped down and was replaced for the Rectification Period by a Steering Committee. The Steering Committee was made up of representatives from each of the four task forces, all of whom were General Members. A former core member participated in this Steering Committee – without voting power – in order to support these members in their new leadership role.

This was a difficult period. The internal conflicts from the beginning of the Rectification Period led to a high level of fragmentation and isolation. The dissolution of the Core marginalized the group’s most experienced members. This undermined their ability to participate fully and actively. It also left the Steering Committee without sufficient mentorship or political support from the group’s traditional leadership.

The lack of group cohesion led to poor participation and accountability in the rectification process. While some task forces accomplished their assigned work, others did almost nothing. This lack of follow-through undermined our ability to answer the questions we had set out for ourselves.

Throughout the Rectification Period, there was a slow but steady exodus from the group – including many of the people who had initially

raised the strongest concerns and criticisms. Attendance at meetings was consistently low. The period was marked by an overall low level of enthusiasm, exhaustion and dwindling morale.

### **The Exciting Exception: STORM’s Response to 9/11**

The one notable exception to STORM’s absence from the broader movement during rectification was the group’s actions in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

On the morning of September 11, STORM convened in Oakland for an emergency meeting. We knew that the fall of the World Trade Center would mark a dramatic shift in international and domestic politics. We knew that the Left had to respond strongly.

We invited other activists to join the meeting that morning. Together, with leadership from STORM members, this ad hoc group planned a vigil for the next night. The vigil was to be an expression of solidarity with Arab- and Muslim-Americans and of mourning for the dead in New York and Washington, D.C. as well as the victims of U.S. imperialism around the world.

The vigil, held in Oakland’s Snow Park, drew hundreds of people. There, STORM members articulated a strong anti-imperialist line that resonated with the everyday people there.

That night, STORM and the other movement leaders expressed sadness and anger at the deaths of innocent working class people. We were angry, first and foremost, with the U.S. government, whose worldwide aggression had engendered such hate across the globe that working class people were not safe at home. We honored those who had lost their lives in the attack – and those who would surely lose their lives in subsequent U.S. attacks overseas.

Just a couple of days after the attacks, STORM released “Four Main Points in Response to the Bombings of the World Trade Center & the U.S. Pentagon.” Our four points were:

1. **Oppose terrorism, and build people’s power.** We argued that grassroots people’s power (“the consciousness,



capacity and confidence of working class and oppressed people”), not terrorist attacks on civilian targets, will be the key to our liberation.

2. **Oppose the narrowing or elimination of the people’s democratic rights.** We predicted and warned against a government crackdown on civil liberties. We wrote, “We must now be extraordinarily vigilant against threats directed against the people – not from underground cells, but from the highest levels of government.”
3. **Rely on global justice to deter future attacks.** We noted that it is the violence and injustice of U.S. imperialism that has put the entire world in danger. Safety at home requires justice abroad.
4. **Oppose racist, anti-Arab bigotry.** We expressed solidarity and support for Arabs and Arab-Americans, already under attack from the media and government. We wrote, “Stereotypes and scapegoating will not lead us out of this crisis. Solidarity and compassion will.”

This document, produced so quickly after the bombings, provided leftists with an anti-imperialist lens through which to analyze the attacks.

### **The Decision to Dissolve STORM**

As the end of the one-year rectification plan approached, informal conversations began to show that many members thought that the group should disband after rectification. Members expressed many different reasons for their thinking. Some primarily expressed fatigue and frustration. Others believed that we didn’t have the capacity to answer the questions facing us. Still others thought that our conflicts with other groups in the movement were irreconcilable and that maintaining the organization would only limit members’ ability to be effective in the movement.

In March 2002, the sixteen remaining members formally decided to disband STORM as an organization.

We all still believed that revolutionary cadre organizations are necessary for the development of a viable revolutionary movement in this country. But we concluded that STORM could no longer be effective in building a revolutionary movement. The baggage of our conflicts within

the movement and our lack of a sufficient strategy were too heavy to carry.

We did not and do not think that STORM, as a revolutionary experiment, was a failure. It was instrumental in establishing a revolutionary internationalist trend in the Bay Area. Indeed, by this point, the members of STORM were only a few of well over a hundred revolutionaries in the Bay Area with politics similar to our own. We had helped to develop many key leaders in that trend – both within STORM and in the broader movement. We had helped found and build many of the organizations these people worked or volunteered at.

But we couldn’t make the changes necessary to play an effective role within this emerging broader trend. Our work had outstripped our vision.

When the last sixteen STORM members decided to dissolve, each committed as an individual revolutionary to helping this emerging trend continue to consolidate. Some are building organizations in working-class communities of color. Some are working to deepen their theoretical skills and strategic vision. Some are promoting revolutionary ideas. Some are developing new revolutionary cadre and building relationships among them. Some are finding other ways to serve the people.

We hope that this work will help lay the groundwork for a more-deeply-rooted, broader and more effective revolutionary cadre organization in the not-too-distant future. We also hope that this history and summation is one step towards that goal. We have collectively tried our best to capture the political lessons from our experiment with STORM. We have learned a lot through this work. We hope that the rest of the movement can learn from it as well.

Most members in STORM were politically self-taught. None of us was trained in party schools. We discovered our politics, and specifically revolutionary Third World Marxism, in our search for tools to advance our work as organizers and activists.

Being self-taught, we developed a distinct and somewhat eclectic brand of revolutionary Marxist politics that grew very much out of both our particular experiences and the broader historical moment.

### **STORM'S Approach to Marxism**

STORM was never formally a “Marxist-Leninist” organization, and we never had a systematic Marxist theoretical framework. But we did have a political commitment to the fundamental ideas of Marxism-Leninism. We upheld the Marxist critique of capitalist exploitation. We agreed with Lenin’s analysis of the state and the party. And we found inspiration and guidance in the insurgent revolutionary strategies developed by Third World revolutionaries like Mao Tse-tung and Amilcar Cabral.

While we placed ourselves in the Marxist tradition, we also tried to critique that tradition and innovate within it. For example, we stressed the importance of revolutionary democracy. Too many post-revolutionary socialist societies were colossal failures on questions of democracy. Our commitment to revolutionary mass organizing reflected our concern that the Marxist Left (as we knew it) did not prioritize the hard work of building power in the working class. And we consistently struggled to analyze and incorporate issues of women’s oppression that are often left out of or trivialized in Marxist analysis and practice.

We also saw our brand of Marxism as, in some ways, a reclamation. In the face of a stereotype of Marxism that racialized it as white, we wanted to reclaim the history of Third World communist struggle. After all, such struggles have made up the overwhelming majority of communist movements worldwide.

But if we were firmly within the Marxist tradition, we were not bound very tightly to any camp within it. With the world communist bloc

dissolving and many veteran communists in the U.S. questioning their political commitments, we received very little guidance in our political development. (Though some of the local veterans of different cadre organizations in the 1970s and 1980s offered us invaluable insight and guidance.)

This was both a challenge and a blessing. Our “independence” led to some serious holes in our analysis, and we ended up with an eclectic brand of Marxism. For example, our Points of Unity discuss capitalism, globalization and white supremacy, but never speak explicitly about “imperialism” – a serious but unintentional omission.

But if we had little help, we also had the freedom to rethink and re-imagine Marxism for our generation. We had the space to take an unorthodox and open approach to this rich tradition. The very conditions that led to our eclecticism also gave us the space to innovate a new approach to revolutionary politics for the 21st Century.

### **Moving from Resistance to Revolution**

Our commitment to communist politics didn’t give us any easy answers about what we should be doing to advance a revolutionary movement in this country. Other organizations with a Marxist analysis seemed to lack a practical program for building the kind of power needed to win our people’s liberation.

Several of these communist groups emphasized the immediate building of the revolutionary vanguard party. They thought the party should prepare to seize power when the people “spontaneously” rise up during imperialism’s inevitable crises. We believed that these groups had badly misassessed the real state of imperialism and of social movements. They prematurely anticipated a peoples’ uprising (which we didn’t see on the immediate horizon) while underestimating the importance and difficulty of building power in oppressed communities to lay the groundwork for future uprisings.

Other communist organizations – and many individual activists – were questioning the possibility of a revolutionary movement ever succeeding. They emphasized immersion in unions and mass struggles to the exclusion of intentional work to develop a revolutionary movement.

We wanted an approach that resolved the contradiction between the need for building immediate (and inevitably reform-based) power in disorganized oppressed communities on the one hand and the need to lay the ground work for the long-term development of a revolutionary movement on the other.

To resolve this tension, STORM developed an innovative analysis about the role of revolutionaries in a non-revolutionary historical period. We called it “Moving from Resistance to Revolution.”

We concluded that the current period is one of “resistance,” not one of “revolution.” We thought that the main work of revolutionaries at such times should be to build resistance fights. These fights would build power and consciousness in oppressed communities. But revolutionaries must design and craft this “resistance work” so as to help lay the foundation for the long-term development of a revolutionary movement. As “conscious forces,” we thought that revolutionaries should work intentionally to help the resistance movement mature into a revolutionary one.

This “Moving from Resistance to Revolution” framework was STORM’s attempt to negotiate the contradiction between reformism and ultra-leftism.

### **STORM’s Points of Unity**

STORM’s primary unity was around the need for the “liberation and solidarity for all oppressed people.” For us, this meant that our vision had to draw on different progressive and revolutionary traditions in order to address the different forms of oppression facing our people. As we crafted our second Points of Unity document, six ideas formed the core of a new, more robust political unity in the group:

- **Revolutionary Democracy:** the belief that our movement will have to replace the falsely-democratic capitalist state with a truly democratic people’s government.
- **Revolutionary Feminism:** the belief that women’s oppression is fundamental to this society and that we have to place “Sisters at the Center” of our struggle.
- **Revolutionary Internationalism:** the belief that white supremacy is a critical force impacting world politics, and that

Third World communities – inside and outside of the United States – along with white anti-racist allies need to work in solidarity build the power we need to overthrow the global system of white supremacy.

- **Central Role of the Working Class:** the belief that, in order to defeat capitalism and other forms of oppression, the working class will have to play the central role in the revolutionary struggle.
- **Urban Marxism:** the belief that the urban space was now the central site of revolutionary struggle, just as the factory and the point of production were in the days of Karl Marx.
- **Third World Communism:** drawing on the revolutionary communist traditions from Asia, Africa and Latin America, including the recognition of the need for a disciplined revolutionary party rooted among oppressed people.

STORM believed that there were three main strategic tasks facing revolutionaries in this non-revolutionary period: building an advance-guard organization, promoting revolutionary ideas and building revolutionary people's power.

We believed that we needed to help lay the groundwork for an advance-guard organization to emerge as a future, more powerful form of revolutionary political organization. Such an organization could help promising militants to develop as revolutionaries. It could help mass organizations develop practically and ideologically. And it could develop and promote lessons and theories from the movement's experience.

We also believed that it was the task of revolutionaries to promote revolutionary ideas among oppressed and exploited people. As we did this, we thought four methods of work would provide the best results: "observation and participation" (gleaned from our study of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense); "the mass line" (as described by Mao Tse-tung); structured "political education"; and consistent "criticism/self criticism" to help us constructively evaluate our individual and group work (this we drew from both Mao and Amilcar Cabral).

Finally, we believed that revolutionaries had to build revolutionary people's power. We saw "mass organizations" – fighting organizations made

up of members of the oppressed and exploited sectors of society – as the key to building this power. We believed that these organizations would be the main instruments of change in the survival struggles of this reform period. And, if revolutionaries could successfully use and develop a revolutionary organizing model, these organizations would become the main engines of the revolutionary peoples' struggle.

We believed that these three areas of work would lay the foundation for a transition from the current reform period into a more intense stage of the revolutionary struggle.





### Did STORM Think It Was the Vanguard?

STORM did not think of itself as the vanguard. But we didn't always act like we didn't think we were the vanguard.

As an organization, we aimed to build (but not necessarily to be) an "advance guard" organization. STORM's position on this question reflected contradictions and ambiguity in our understanding of our organizational form.

We intentionally did not use the term "vanguard" in our Points Of Unity. Instead, we chose Amilcar Cabral's term "advance-guard" to signal our concern with the commandist and sectarian practices of the self-appointed "vanguard parties" that we had seen.

STORM believed that advance-guard organizations are necessary and that building one was part of our strategy. But we never declared definitively whether or not STORM itself was an advance-guard organization.

We did, however, consciously try to play some of the roles that an advance-guard would play in the movement. We attempted to develop revolutionaries, promote revolutionary ideas and engage in revolutionary mass organizing. Many of STORM's members played crucial leadership roles in mass movements. They helped these movements to develop a self-conscious revolutionary character – a task Lenin assigns to the "vanguard."

But, again, STORM did not give members any clear guidance about whether STORM was an advance-guard organization. Members drew their own varied conclusions about our relationship to the mass movement.

Some believed that STORM was an advance-guard organization and should be forthright about that with the rest of the movement. Others believed that STORM was not an advance-guard organization but that our role was to help lay the groundwork for the eventual emergence of one. This led to inconsistent approaches from and behavior by our members – and problems in our work.

Our experience was a part of a larger historical debate in the socialist left about what gives an organization a legitimate claim to a leadership, "advance-guard" role in the mass movement. Many members were deeply opposed to what we called "self-declared vanguardism." But we didn't talk about whether that meant that we weren't a vanguard organization – or that we were playing a vanguard role but just didn't want to say it.

STORM's structure was loosely based on a cadre organization model, a traditionally Marxist-Leninist form of organization. A cadre organization is made up of disciplined activists with a high degree of ideological unity who engage in collective study and political work. Such an organization is intentionally different from more open and mass forms of activist organization, which do not require high standards of discipline or ideological unity.

While we believed that mass organizations are necessary to the revolutionary struggle, we wanted to build STORM as a revolutionary cadre organization.

### Membership Requirements

STORM required its members to be disciplined and actively involved in the work of the organization. Each member had to pay \$20 per month in dues, participate in at least one Work Group, adhere to STORM's Codes of Conduct and Security Protocols (described below) and regularly attend organizational meetings.

General Members had to agree with STORM's Points of Unity. Core Members, on the other hand, had to agree with the Points of Unity and be committed to revolutionary Marxism. This distinction ensured the centrality of red politics in the group while providing space in the General Membership for non-communists. It also gave General Members an opportunity to learn about Marxist ideas and see them in practice without being required to adhere to them right away.

STORM's General Membership met twice per month, and the Core met an additional two times each month.

### Closed Membership

Like most cadre organizations, STORM had a closed membership. A person could not unilaterally decide to join the organization. Instead, STORM invited people to join based on political and practical unity with the organization.

New members were brought into the group as a part of a “class.” A class was a group of people who were invited in at the same time and went through a structured, collective orientation.

STORM’s membership meetings were generally closed to people who were not STORM members. In exceptional moments, the membership could decide to open meetings to others.

Our closed membership structure was designed to maintain a high level of group discipline and accountability, to preserve a reasonable level of security and to give members a structured space for political development. It also ensured consistent participation from members from week to week (unlike RAW, STORM’s predecessor).

But the most significant reason for STORM’s closed membership policy was probably that it allowed us to ensure that women and people of color would always be the majority of the organization’s membership. STORM had a policy that each incoming class be at least 60 percent women and at least 75 percent people of color. The quotas also mandated that women of color be a plurality of each class.

### **The Core/General Split**

STORM began as a flat revolutionary collective with no defined political leadership body. But in 1997 we established a Core leadership body and a General Membership.

The most basic division of labor between the Core and the General Membership was around line and program. The Core was charged with developing STORM’s line (i.e., our analysis) in dialogue with the General Membership. The General Membership had to develop STORM’s program (i.e., our practical work).

The Core was also responsible for ensuring the overall functionality of the organization. It accomplished this task through the Coordinating Committee. Made up of four Core Members, the CC was responsible for setting meeting agendas and ensuring the general functionality of the group.

The composition of STORM’s original core was based on seniority in

the organization. All members who were in the organizations before 1998 became core members. Those who joined later joined as General Members.

The Core was self-selecting, choosing new Core Members based on their political development and leadership skills. We chose not to have “elections” to the Core in order to maintain its political coherence and functionality.

### **Codes of Conduct & Security Protocols**

STORM’s Codes of Conduct and Security Protocols gave us a shared understanding of how we should conduct ourselves as revolutionaries. They developed out of our studies of movement history and out of members’ years of experience as activists and organizers (where we had seen unhealthy and unprincipled interactions undermine political work).

Trying to conduct ourselves in accordance with these guidelines was a new experience for many of us. It felt strange at first. But it ultimately proved to be helpful to our organizational culture and effectiveness. Beyond the specific Codes, the practice of “revolutionary discipline” – the idea that we were expected to be accountable to the collective – was important in our development as revolutionaries.

**Codes of Conduct:** STORM had Codes of Conduct in order to promote revolutionary discipline and ensure that our day-to-day practice served the best interests of the organization and the movement. The Codes of Conduct governed how we were to treat each other as comrades in the struggle. Members were required to:

- put the organization’s decisions before our own personal inclinations
- to raise problems directly with each other (instead of “shit-talking”)
- to be constructive in our criticisms (instead of tearing each other down)
- to be respectful with each other and fair in our evaluations of each other.

We were expected not to use degrading or oppressive language or use

## The Politics Behind STORM's Structure

STORM was not self-consciously “democratic centralist.” But our structure shared many of the dynamics of that traditional communist structure, designed to draw on the strengths of both “democracy” and “centralization.”

The basic tenets of democratic centralism are:

- **Freedom of discussion and unity in action.** To the extent possible, all decisions are made based on free and open discussion. But once the group decides, all members are expected to go along with group decisions.
- **Party discipline.** Members are expected to put the interests of both the organization and the movement before their own.
- **Accountability of all leading bodies** of the organization to the total membership.
- **Subordination of lower bodies to higher bodies.** All members agree to accept decisions and assessments of leadership until designated opportunities for debate and discussion.

Historically, the need to resist state repression while maintaining political clarity has tended to push democratic centralist organizations have tended to emphasize centralism at the expense of democracy. Parties have often tacitly or openly discouraged internal debate. Their leadership bodies have tended to be self-selecting, or subject only to infrequent elections.

This troubling tendency has masked the important insight that parties should be as democratic as possible given historical conditions. This includes building sensible mechanisms to ensure the accountability of the leadership to the membership (e.g., criticism/self-criticism, elections, etc.).

We knew little about the longstanding debate about how best to balance centralism and democracy in a revolutionary organization. Although we didn't have the formal structures of a democratic centralist organization, we did adopt a generally democratic centralist orientation. We based our structures loosely on that tradition (e.g., our Core/General membership structure, our self-selecting core, our “put the group first” Code of Conduct).

Our experience in STORM has greatly deepened our understanding of the theory and practice, the strengths and the weaknesses, of democratic centralism. One of the most valuable lessons we learned was that an organization's leadership should be intentionally transparent and dialogical with the membership. This helps the group achieve maximum clarity and unity and to come to the strongest political positions possible.

alcohol or drugs while engaged in organizational work. We were also expected to use special care and consideration in romantic relationships with other comrades.

**Security Protocols:** STORM also had eight Security Protocols to help members resist attempted disruption of our political work by the state or other forces.

Members were expected to share information about the organization on a “need to know” basis only. For instance, we did not give out lists of our members' names or other organizational details. We did not want the government to be able to get such information easily.

We were expected to be cautious about our communication. We were to avoid talking about sensitive information on easily-surveilled means of communication (e.g., phones, e-mail). We also were discouraged from discussing any kind of illegal or criminal activity – even as a joke.

Members were expected not to engage in reckless political activities that could endanger the group or themselves.

We were to stay in communication with the group if suspicious incidents occurred that could indicate surveillance or disruption.

### Work Groups

STORM members were expected to be active in at least one of the organization's Work Groups. Work Groups were spaces for STORM members working in similar fields to discuss their on-the-ground work and provide each other with support and feedback. They reflected the sectors of movement work in which members were already engaged: worker organizing, youth organizing, cultural work and theory development.

In Work Group discussions, members could discuss how they were carrying out STORM's general strategy of “promoting revolutionary ideas” and “building revolutionary people's power” in our mass work.

In all of our mass work, STORM members were encouraged to prioritize three tasks:

- build the capacity of these key sectors of the mass movement;
- build the revolutionary leadership of working class women of color in those sectors; and
- facilitate movement and organizational leaders in their development as revolutionaries so that they would be prepared to help advance the struggle from a resistance phase to a revolutionary one.

STORM also had a political education committee, which we called 411. 411 was made up of both Core and General Members. Political education took place in each meeting and through periodic mandatory weekend training “intensives.” This committee was also in charge of orienting new members to the organization.

### **Decision-Making**

STORM made organizational decisions using a modified consensus process designed to draw out as much discussion as possible and to achieve a high degree of unity on all decisions.

## **SUMMATION OF OUR EXPERIENCES**

### **STORM’s Successes, Errors & Lessons**

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STORM accomplished many important things in the movement. We overcame huge obstacles to help build important sectors of the resistance movement and establish a revolutionary internationalist trend in the Bay Area. We also made many errors and came up against personal, political and historical limitations.

In this section we attempt to name STORM’s successes and errors and to draw out some of the lessons from these experiences. We also list some outstanding questions in hopes of provoking friendly but rigorous discussion and debate among revolutionaries.

### **Revolutionary Politics**

**Experiences:** STORM developed and promoted a set of explicitly revolutionary ideas during a time when these politics were hard to find. While many people in our generation dismissed Marxism as inherently white and sectarian, we looked towards the revolutionary traditions of Third World communism and found valuable and inspiring models for revolutionary change.

We used Third World Marxism as our starting point in addressing issues of race, gender, democracy and culture. We advanced non-traditional revolutionary ideas like Sisters at the Center, urban Marxism and reform organizing as a tool in the revolutionary movement.

Having developed these politics, STORM then promoted them throughout our work in the mass movement. Popularizing revolutionary internationalist politics among young people in the Bay Area was our most important contribution. Our vision of total liberation and solidarity among all oppressed people captured an important part of our generation’s revolutionary imagination. We helped establish a revolutionary internationalist trend in the Bay Area that continues to grow.

STORM’s politics also inspired young revolutionaries across the coun-



try. STORM and our politics helped to consolidate and strengthen revolutionaries in other cities.

We not only inspired activists and everyday people in our generation, but also moved many movement elders to come out of political retirement and return to the movement.

**Lessons:** Our experience has taught us that it is both crucial and possible to promote revolutionary politics – and Third World communist politics in particular – in these times. Revolutionaries can keep these politics relevant by grounding them in the day-to-day experience of building the movement. And revolutionary politics can in turn make our work more effective by framing it in a larger analysis and strategy.

## Approach to Theory & Ideology

**Experiences:** STORM had a critical and non-dogmatic approach to revolutionary theory and ideology. The slogan “Take the best and leave the rest” described our attempt to draw out the strongest parts of different radical traditions.

Though we placed ourselves in the Marxist tradition, our approach to it was relatively flexible and unorthodox. This strengthened our work, allowing us to make these politics more relevant and accessible.

We resisted the tendency in the Marxist tradition to lock ourselves narrowly into dogmatism and sectarian divisions. Instead we drew on different parts of the tradition (e.g., from Marx’s own writings, from Third World communism and from Marxist feminism). We found ways to adapt the Marxist tradition to our particular conditions, making it more relevant to our generation. For example, our emphasis on the intersection between different forms of oppression and our use of “facilitative leadership” methods resonated well with young people of color in the Bay Area.

STORM also made many errors in our approach to theory. Although the priority we placed on theory and study was high relative to the

rest of the movement, we still did not take study seriously enough. As a result, our analyses were sometimes crude and over-simplified.

We didn’t engage in enough internal political debate and dialogue. We didn’t use written materials (internally or externally) to help clarify our political positions, either. Many of our most advanced members spent all of their time developing trainings to bring newer, less developed members up to speed. They spent too little time continuing their own theoretical development.

Some of STORM’s internal culture even served to stifle debate. We were sometimes quick to dismiss an idea as “liberal,” “ultra-nationalist” or some other negative label without really discussing or analyzing it. Although dogmatism and over-simplification didn’t define our internal culture, they were present enough to hinder debate and dialogue within the group.

In some ways, STORM developed a culture of rushing to unity. We often failed to tease out different political perspectives within the organization. Those differences came to the fore only later, in destructive conflict.

We were sometimes dismissive of other revolutionary trends, like revolutionary nationalism. We didn’t build strong relationships with organizations in these other trends. And we didn’t draw on the useful contributions of these traditions. These errors undermined our ability to act effectively in a politically diverse movement.

**Lessons:** Revolutionaries need to take study seriously. We need to draw from the experiences of past movements and push existing theory farther based on our own experience. We should also participate in formal “schools” for study and training.

In addition to studying theory and history, it is crucial that revolutionaries study current events. Studying history and theory can offer us a set of skills, but ultimately we have to apply those skills to our own particular conditions. Studying the current conditions allows revolutionaries to understand the terrain on which we’re operating, what we’re up against and our strategic opportunities and challenges.

Revolutionaries must avoid sectarianism and divisiveness. We need to draw respectfully and critically on many traditions, both within the Marxist tendency and beyond it, without losing political clarity about our own revolutionary vision.

Dismissal of other revolutionary traditions is a divisive, sectarian error. Different revolutionary trends can and should provide each other with comradely debate that helps all of us gain clarity and build unity. And revolutionaries must be able to act in fronts with many other kinds of people and organizations, so we should definitely be able to do that with other revolutionaries.

Revolutionary organizations should actively cultivate spaces, internally and externally, for rigorous, comradely debate and dialogue. We must challenge each other and our ideas. But we must also guard against demagoguery<sup>1</sup> and dogmatism in the guise of debate and dialogue. We must discuss and analyze ideas – not label and dismiss them.

## Revolutionary Strategy

**Experiences:** STORM had some good initial strategic impulses. We always thought that we should engage in grassroots organizing reform struggles to lay the groundwork for the long-term development of a revolutionary movement. We also always saw working class communities of color (and particularly women in these communities) as the main force for revolutionary struggle in the U.S.

But these good impulses were ultimately too general to carry us through the strategic and historical challenges that we faced. We tended to merely stay one or two steps ahead of the rest of the movement when we should have been developing an intentional, long-term strategic plan. STORM lacked a clear revolutionary strategy. And we lacked the tools to develop an effective strategy. We needed to better understand dialectical materialism, political economy and historic revolutionary strategies and tactics.

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<sup>1</sup> *Appealing to passion and prejudice instead of engaging in principled political argument.*

Without a shared revolutionary strategy, STORM didn't have a collective approach to our mass work. Members made individual decisions about how to apply our political line in their mass work. So they often took a wide range of political positions.

Members made individual decisions about what mass work we should engage in. We often gravitated towards the most militant of the spontaneous struggles. Filled with established activists, these struggles provided members with few opportunities for base-building among everyday, unorganized people or impacting mass consciousness.

Our lack of collective strategy also impacted our decisions about what social sectors we should prioritize. Left to their own individual and spontaneous choices, many members immersed themselves in the youth and student movement (where many of them had come from in the first place). This had definite benefits. We found a lot of support for our revolutionary politics among working class youth of color. And we were able to support the development of the militant youth movement, made up predominantly of young working class people of color. But an organization dedicated to the liberation of the working class as a whole needs a relationship to broader working class communities – including both young people and adults.

Finally, our lack of a clear, articulable strategy made it impossible for other people in the movement to know what we were up to. This contributed to create the perception that STORM was making secret, behind-the-scenes maneuvers. The movement could not dialogue with us about our strategy, and they could not hold us accountable to it.

All that being said, STORM also faced a number of structural challenges to developing a revolutionary strategy. We were a regional organization. There was no strong international Left. And the existing social movements were of a relatively small scale. In these conditions, it would have been difficult for us to develop a comprehensive strategy for revolutionary change.

**Lessons:** Revolutionaries need revolutionary strategy. History places real limitations on the revolutionary Left's ability to develop comprehensive long-term strategy at this particular moment. But we must

push those limits and put serious time into strategy development.

To build strategy, we need an analysis of current conditions. We need an assessment of what will be necessary to defeat U.S. imperialism. We need a projection of how a mass revolutionary movement will develop. And we need an analysis of the main social sectors most able and willing to lead that struggle.

In our experience, we found that dialectical materialism is a helpful method of analysis for developing strategy. Helpful, but not easy. Mastery in the comprehension and application of materialist dialectics requires a great deal of study and practice.

Developing strategy and class analysis also requires a deep understanding of political economy. Imperialism, national/racial oppression and gender oppression are the central pillars of political economy today.

Finally, it is important to study the revolutionary strategies and tactics employed by other liberation movements to help us develop a strategic framework and to save us from re-inventing the wheel.

Revolutionaries' mass work should be guided by their organizational strategy – not by the spontaneity of unexpected crisis or individual inclination.

Revolutionaries need to make intentional and strategic decisions about what social sectors to prioritize. They must also be deliberate in striking a balance between building strong organizations and bases in working class communities and taking advantage of opportunities for fast-paced mass mobilizations, which tend to attract and activate more of a middle-class base. Both are necessary, but neither alone is sufficient, in our efforts to build a revolutionary movement.

Organizations need to articulate their strategies publicly and engage in open dialogue with the broader movement about their ideas.

### **Outstanding Questions:**

- What is an effective revolutionary strategy in our historical time and place?

- How do revolutionaries develop and adapt that strategy?
- What are our analyses of contemporary imperialism, regional political economy and national/racial oppression? How do these analyses inform our strategy?

## **Cadre Organization**

**Experiences:** Whether rightly or wrongly, many STORM members would never have joined any of the existing left parties. They didn't seem to represent us. They weren't made up of oppressed people. And they seemed like anachronisms from another generation of politics.

STORM's structure and politics made more sense to revolutionaries of our post-USSR generation. STORM was our organizational home as we developed as young revolutionaries. We had the space to learn about revolutionary discipline and the responsibility of the individual to the collective. And STORM provided a structure for role modeling and mentorship between revolutionaries with different levels of experience.

In STORM, revolutionary-minded activists came together to engage in political discussion and shared work. And outside of STORM, the organization and its members had a tremendous impact on the broader movement.

STORM helped sustain and develop both budding and experienced revolutionaries who would probably have burned out otherwise. It pushed us to clarify our political ideas. Without STORM, our politics would not have developed as sharply as they did. And the institutions we built would not have been as politically and ideologically clear as they are.

STORM members developed strong skills sets – as organizers, agitators, activists and revolutionary theoreticians. STORM gave us a space to draw out lessons from our mass work. The organization pushed us to move beyond being “good activists” to being intentional revolution-

aries – even while we were struggling to figure out what that meant.

STORM kept us from becoming isolated as revolutionaries. We had opportunities to share and discuss our experiences and challenges with our revolutionary peers. And as members of a revolutionary cadre organization, we were able to re-conceptualize our mass work as part of a broader revolutionary strategy that transcended our specific work.

STORM held us accountable as revolutionaries to our politics and for our conduct – both inside and outside of the organization. Together, we developed a high level of trust, cohesion and unity in action.

STORM brought revolutionaries together across sectoral lines (e.g., youth organizers, intellectuals, cultural workers and labor organizers). Doing so helped us understand what it will take to build a revolutionary movement amongst oppressed people. Sectoral work (e.g., work in a specific neighborhood, worksite, occupation, or with a particular nationality) is essential to building organization and class consciousness among the people. But to become too narrowly focused on this work is dangerous – and all too easy. STORM guarded against this by bringing revolutionaries together across sector lines.

STORM made mistakes in our practice as a cadre organization. We did not understand clearly enough the distinction between cadre organization, revolutionary parties, revolutionary organization and vanguard organization. This made for a cloudy organizational self-conception and a misperception from without as a self-proclaimed vanguard.

Looking back, that misperception was largely our responsibility. We hoped that other activists would choose trust, not suspicion, as their default position when there was something confusing or concerning about the group. But it is fundamentally the responsibility of the cadre organization to be clear about how it intends to relate to the rest of the movement. We should have been clearer that we were neither a party nor a vanguard organization. We were a cadre organization that was working to build revolutionary mass organizations and to lay the groundwork for a future revolutionary party (or parties) by building a broad revolutionary internationalist trend.

We were also not clear how our organizational form and role would need to evolve as conditions in the movement changed. Some former members view STORM's dissolution as a failure to adapt to meet the movement's changing needs.

**Lessons:** Cadre organizations are valuable and necessary mechanisms for the development of a revolutionary movement. They provide a space for people to develop as revolutionaries, to develop a cross-sectoral vision for the revolutionary movement, to hold each other accountable and to be more politically grounded in their mass work.

A cadre organization need not be a vanguard organization. There is no single “correct” organizational model, applicable to all cadre organizations in all historical periods. Different cadre organizations will play different roles based on historical conditions – including the skills, experiences and relationship of their members.

How a cadre organization should function depends greatly on concrete conditions. For example, a cadre organization must play a radically different role when the movement is in a period of relative ebb than when the movement is poised to take power.

In the current period, cadre organizations can play an important role in building the movement and training revolutionary leaders. But such organizations will be hard to sustain given the lack of “revolutionary momentum.” Of course, this does not mean that we should not build cadre organizations. It simply means that we must be clear about the goals and role of such organizations.

Any cadre organization built in this period – while the left is fragmented and the mass movement is at a relatively low level – will have to change radically to remain relevant and viable as the movement grows and develops.

### **Outstanding Question**

- What kinds of cadre organizations are needed in this particular historical period?





## Leadership Development

**Experiences:** Leadership development was central to STORM's work. We successfully developed young activists from oppressed communities as revolutionaries. STORM provided on-going, structured training on revolutionary history and theory. This helped to expose many young people to revolutionary ideas for the first time.

Unlike most of the U.S. Left, STORM provided a place for oppressed people – people of color, women, queer people and working class people – to develop a revolutionary analysis and practical skills and, as the overwhelming majority at each level of membership, to lead the organization.

This happened only because of our political and structural commitment – manifested in our closed membership structure and demographic requirements for each class – to ensure the predominance of oppressed people in the membership. This commitment also allowed us to promote and develop the leadership of women of color – one of our central priorities.

STORM did not, however, have the capacity to develop our members as thoroughly as necessary. We wanted to be, as Mao wrote, both “red and expert.” But we were not “red” enough. We needed to be better versed in Marxist theory to help us analyze the world around us, to determine our strategic direction and to strengthen our practice. And we were not technically “expert” enough in the tasks that we took up – as organizers, educators, cultural workers, etc.

Our shortfalls in these matters were due in part to the self-taught nature of our politics, described above. In retrospect, we should have sought mentorship and training from more experienced people. Additionally, the organization should have developed an on-going curriculum for members to develop their understanding of revolutionary history and theory. This way, members would have been able to take more individual initiative in their study.

We also made a mistake in not considering emotional development

to be a part of our members' development as revolutionaries. We did not help our members heal from past life trauma or from personal challenges encountered during political work. Such hurt and trauma are inevitable and, if left to fester, can negatively impact our political work. STORM's inattention to this matter allowed members' political and practical skills to outstrip their personal capacity to handle the pressure of their work. This led to a lot of interpersonal conflict and tension with other activists.

**Lessons:** Cadre development is a central task for the revolutionaries. Developing revolutionaries from oppressed communities is especially important. Without revolutionary leaders from oppressed communities, cadre organizations will not be relevant. Revolutionary cadre should aim to be “red and expert.” They should seek out opportunities for learning both internal and external to their organizations. Cadre organizations need to pay attention to members' personal development and emotional growth.

## Building the Movement

**Experiences:** STORM prioritized work to build the broader radical movement. We believed that building the movement and building independent mass organizations should be the central work of a cadre organization.

This movement-building orientation made us relatively unique within the Left. It was an attempt to avoid what we saw as some of the chief errors of many other cadre organizations. Too many cadre groups either focus exclusively on building the cadre organization itself, isolate themselves from working class people of color or have abandoned revolutionary politics.

Our members all came out of mass work. Most cut their teeth in the youth and student movement. Others came out of low-wage worker organizing or cultural activism. While in STORM, we all maintained a high level of engagement with the mass movement.

Though STORM was not a mass organization, it was an important part of our mass work. The organization provided an important base of support for members. It helped us do our work more effectively and more intentionally. It provided a space for learning and passing on the lessons we learned in our mass work.

STORM members made many important contributions to the broader movement. We helped to found and build crucial organizations and institutions, many of which continue to uphold politics similar to STORM's. We helped to develop promising leaders. And we worked to promote revolutionary ideas in the midst of our "reform" organizing.

Applying our movement-building orientation, we helped establish a revolutionary internationalist trend in the Bay Area. Thanks in part to our work, there is now a broad community of people, organizations and institutions who share a commitment to revolutionary internationalism and a broad identification with Third World communism. This trend is much broader than STORM ever was and is still growing and thriving today.

But there were many points of confusion and difficulty in this work. Most of these revolved around our lack of clarity about the relationship between our organization on the one hand and the mass movement and mass organizations on the other.

Historically, cadre organizations have had difficulty negotiating their relationships with mass organizations. STORM was no exception.

Without a clear strategy or a clear set of goals, we often functioned more as extra-hard-working activists with revolutionary ideas than as conscious revolutionaries with a politically grounded approach to our mass work.

Other people did not necessarily see it this way. Our shared politics and style of work made it seem like we indeed had a strategy. Many in the movement assumed we had a plan to lead them somewhere – and that we weren't telling them about it.

Lacking a clear strategy, we also lacked a clear understanding of the

role we should play in the movement.

We often had poor communication with the movement organizations we supported. Even with organizations that STORM or STORM members had founded, we had no explicit, mutually agreed-upon understandings of how we should relate.

We did not have any mechanisms for other organizations to give STORM feedback or to hold us accountable for our actions and behavior. In later years, we tried to build such mechanisms. We set up public meetings to get feedback from people in the movement. And we had mediation meetings with several different organizations. While not every meeting accomplished what we had hoped, they represented an important step towards figuring out how to work out conflicts in the movement in a principled way and to engage in public criticism/self-criticism.

Many of our difficulties in this area were due to our unclear understanding of the role we should play in the movement – another by-product of our unclear strategy. We weren't sure if we were a non-vanguard cadre organization or a revolutionary party. We knew we weren't "the vanguard" – but sometimes we acted like we thought we were.

STORM very rarely produced organizational literature or sponsored independent events or actions. Our members thought of building people's power through building mass organizations as their primary work. We didn't prioritize engaging with and relating to people as STORM. This had at least three serious negative consequences.

First, it left the movement and the people without access to our thinking and analysis on the current issues in the movement, in the country, in the world. Those ideas could have been helpful contributions.

Second, it left our thoughts and intentions to the imagination of others. Without an explanation, it was easy for others – even allies – to see our actions as sinister.

Third, it left our work in other organizations as our lone public face. With our intentions a mystery, it was no great leap for others to



assume that our members' work in other organizations was an attempt by STORM to pull strings behind the scene.

**Lessons:** We found that building a mass movement is important work for revolutionaries. Such work is one of the primary tasks of this historical period. Though building cadre and advance guard organizations is important, it cannot be the exclusive focus of revolutionaries.

On the other hand, building the movement cannot be revolutionaries' sole activity, either. Cadre organizations must balance movement-building work with independent activity that makes visible the work of revolutionaries.

It is important for a cadre organization to have a clearly defined role in the movement. This requires clear communication with other organizations and individuals in the movement (including regular, formal mechanisms for criticism and feedback).

Cadre organizations need to take special care to be as transparent as possible in mass work. How much transparency is possible will depend on the conditions of the moment. At the least, cadre organizations need to be clear and open about their strategy. The movement should know what the organization is trying to accomplish. That way, mass organizations can make independent and informed decisions about how to relate to the cadre organization.

### **Outstanding Questions**

- What kind of practical program is appropriate for a cadre organization in this phase of building broad resistance movements?
- What kinds of relationships should a closed cadre organization build with independent mass organizations? With working class communities directly?
- What are the principles of practice that revolutionaries need to uphold in their interaction with other movement activists?
- What is appropriate work for cadre organizations to take up independently?

## **Leadership & Democracy**

**Experiences:** Like all effective organizations, STORM had to figure out how to support leadership while fostering democracy. Like all organizational models, our Core/General membership structure had strengths and challenges in addressing this question.

We made all of our decisions using a modified consensus process. This encouraged, indeed demanded, participation from all members. It ensured that all members had the power and opportunity to have a significant impact on organizational decisions. It also helped all of us develop as thinkers and political actors. The best way to learn about democracy is to engage in it, and STORM members got to do just that.

The General Membership had control over STORM's program. This meant that every member participated in decisions about our practical work (which represented the vast majority of our decisions).

But if parts of STORM's structure fostered democracy, other parts, along with our organizational culture, tended to concentrate power and influence in the hands of a few people.

STORM's Core was critical to much of our success. The Core's high level of commitment, cohesion and political and personal unity made it a very effective leadership body. As a result, STORM came to rely heavily on these few members to provide internal leadership and to represent the organization publicly.

This presented a number of challenges to the organization.

First, the Core and Core members had a tremendous – at times, decisive – influence on the General Membership – even on questions within the General Membership's Constitutional purview.

STORM's reliance on the Core put an intense amount of political and personal pressure on Core members.

And by relying so heavily on the Core, STORM failed to take advantage of or sufficiently develop the abilities of other members. When key leaders left, other members had difficulty filling the voids in leadership (e.g., ideological, practical or strategic leadership) that those leaders left behind.

At times, a few STORM members wielded outsized, almost dominant, influence within the organization while being held to lesser standards of accountability than the rest of the membership. This is a classic trap into which many organizations have fallen. Though never as severe as some outside the organization perceived it to be, this dynamic did surface sometimes in STORM.

We established a self-selecting Core, entrusted with developing the organization's line and providing political leadership, to address the challenges that we faced early in our organizational development. At that point, STORM was young, and we had only a few members who a) were politically committed to Marxism and b) saw STORM as their primary political commitment.

As historical conditions changed (i.e., we became an established local left organization with a large General Membership almost entirely committed to red politics), our structure probably should have evolved. For instance, it may have made sense to have the General Membership elect the Core. But we didn't recognize the need for structural innovation. We made no changes to STORM's structure until our second Rectification Period.

We based our structure loosely on a classic "democratic centralist" model (see "STORM's Structure"). We did so with relatively little historical information about or theoretical engagement with that model. In all, we tended to approach the question too one-sidedly, falling down on the "centralist" side of the equation. This was most evident in our decision to make the Core self-selecting.

With deeper study of this tradition, we could have been more deliberate and thoughtful in designing our structure. By building more intentional structures for democracy, accountability and leadership development, we could have drawn on the strengths of democratic centralism (e.g.,

prioritizing political leadership, clarity and accountability of leadership, efficiency) while addressing some of its challenges.

**Lessons:** Leadership and democracy are both essential components in any effective organization. But they are sometimes in tension. How to best negotiate that tension varies according to concrete conditions. But an organization must never approach this question one-sidedly.

Strong political leadership is critical to the survival and success of organizations and of the movement as a whole. Organizations need political leadership. They also need a division of labor that ensures that certain core roles are filled, that certain essential responsibilities are met.

Clear leadership structures also help keep the dynamics of power and influence transparent and obvious to everyone in the organization. It also allows the organization to hold its leadership accountable.

Formalizing leadership, however, does not eliminate the need to develop the leadership abilities of all members. Failure to do so will damage both the capacity and the unity of the organization as a whole.

Democratic participation must be both facilitated by leaders and initiated by members at all levels of the organization. Meaningful democratic participation requires study, reflection and engagement from all members. And it requires that leadership be responsive to and engaged with the larger membership. Leadership bodies need to be intentionally transparent about their internal processes.

In a revolutionary cadre organization, a strong line, good practice and unified direction for the group depend on democratic participation from the entire membership.

We need to be aware of and struggle against the tendency towards excessive centralization in our organizations. We need to develop organizational structures that allow for clear and efficient leadership while prioritizing democratic participation and leadership development.

As an organization grows and changes, so must its structure.

We need to study democratic centralism critically to learn from the accomplishments and errors of that tradition.

### **Outstanding Questions:**

- What are effective internal structures for political organizations – i.e., structures that strike a good balance between democratic participation and debate on the one hand and effective decision-making and accountable leadership on the other?
- How do we most effectively develop the leadership of people from oppressed communities?

## **Nationalism & Internationalism**

**Experiences:** STORM’s dedication to “solidarity among oppressed people” and revolutionary internationalism was an important part of our politics. This idea holds a lot of strength. Most importantly, revolutionary internationalism emphasizes the anti-racist, anti-capitalist interests that all oppressed people share – regardless of the real or imagined conflicts they may have with one another.

STORM had a strong critique of the left’s historical racism and its denial of the central role of the fight against racism in the United States. We always prioritized work in communities of color. And our members consistently worked on issues that challenged white supremacy.

Our mere existence as a multi-racial, people of color-led organization that included white comrades challenged many peoples’ preconceived notions of what was politically possible.

But our internationalism was not fully developed. We tended to substitute our multi-racial composition, our anti-racist practice and our critique of the racism of the Left for a more developed political line.

In its best form, internationalism is rooted in concrete, historical conditions and experience. STORM’s internationalism was not well enough grounded in the historical experience of racial and national oppression

within the U.S. We still do not have a developed, collective analysis of racism and the subjugation of peoples of color within the U.S. But we agree that STORM’s line was too broad and under-developed.

STORM tended towards an emphasis on the common struggle of all people of color instead of a more in-depth understanding of the specific histories and roles of different oppressed communities within U.S. imperialism. Our work tended to focus only on multi-racial constituencies and organization. We neglected to build organization in and unity among specific communities with distinct interests and issues.

We didn’t have a clear analysis about the relationship between working class communities of color and the white working class. We didn’t have an adequate analysis of the internal class contradictions within communities of color, either.

STORM mistakenly set internationalist politics in opposition to nationalist politics. We over-extended our valid critique of narrow forms of cultural nationalism to include all forms of nationalism. We did not pay enough attention to the centrality of national liberation in the Third World communist tradition.

On a different – but related – topic, STORM did not create intentional spaces for members from different oppressed communities (e.g., different racial/national groups, women, queer people, working class people) to build community and political analysis around the particular issues facing their communities.

Narrowly focused on our goal of building unity among all oppressed people, we often failed to address the distinct experiences and interests of different oppressed groups. We sometimes acted as if we were “beyond all that.” But this kind of focus is necessary for individual healing from and unlearning of oppression, for developing solidarity and pride amongst members of different oppressed communities, and for advancing the entire organization’s analysis, program and practice on different fronts. For example, it would probably have served us to have discussions about the different ways that white supremacy impacts different communities of color, or about promoting a queer-friendly culture in a mixed organization.

**Lessons:** We believe that racial oppression and national liberation within the U.S. are central questions. All revolutionary organizations need to prioritize political clarity on these questions.

Revolutionaries need to understand the particular experiences of different races/oppressed nationalities and their specific relationship to U.S. imperialism. We also need to build deep solidarity between different communities so we can all fight together for our shared interest – the defeat of imperialism.

Distinct spaces for people from particular oppressed communities can be an important part of building true unity among oppressed peoples.

In our experience, internationalist politics are crucial. It is important, however, that internationalism not be misunderstood as a form of anti-nationalism. It should be a politic that builds unity among the struggles of different oppressed peoples and national liberation movements and that promotes a united commitment to the liberation of all oppressed people.

There is a tremendous basis for unity between revolutionary internationalist and nationalist trends as well as an important dynamic tension that helps both political tendencies grow and become sharper.

### **Outstanding Questions**

- How do we build unity and solidarity among members of different oppressed communities within our organization?
- How do we organize the multi-racial working class in a way that both recognizes the real differences between different communities and builds on our fundamental basis of unity?
- How do we address different levels of organization and political consciousness within different oppressed communities?

## **Revolutionary Feminism**

**Experiences:** STORM centered much of our political analysis on the concept of keeping “Sisters at the Center” of the struggle – a slogan that STORM developed early in our history to express our commitment to keeping women of color and working class women at the center of our analysis, program and practice.

We were critical of white feminisms that marginalize and erase the experiences of women of color. We were also critical of other parts of the Left – whether communist, nationalist or neither – that under-prioritize the issues of women of color and working class women.

This position – while also found in many woman of color feminist circles – is alarmingly under-prioritized by the rest of the Left. We advanced this “Sisters at the Center” line through explicit propaganda pieces, through our style of work and through theoretical study.

STORM’s commitment to keeping Sisters at the Center of our work manifested in many ways. Our membership quotas ensured that our membership had more women than men and more people of color than white people. The quotas also ensured that women of color would be a plurality of the membership.

This created an organizational climate different from most of the rest of the Left, which was whiter and more male. STORM’s climate was more welcoming to many women of color. STORM had many strong women of color leaders who played a very public role in the broader movement. Their example as militant, articulate, and politically developed leaders served as an inspiration for many young women of color. These leaders disproved many peoples’ perception that women of color couldn’t play such roles. And STORM members were expected to (and, for the most part, did) prioritize developing the leadership of women of color in our mass work.

On the theoretical front, STORM prioritized studies of revolutionary feminism. We organized both internal education and public study series on questions of revolutionary feminism. We worked to push our

politics past the sexist assumptions of much of the Marxist world (e.g., that feminism is inherently “bourgeois” and that all other liberation struggles should be subordinated to the fight against capitalism).

We also studied the role of women in Third World liberation movements. We found a rich history and a vision that united struggles against capitalism, colonialism and women’s oppression.

At a time when transgender liberation and its relationship to revolutionary feminism were woefully neglected topics in the movement at large, STORM worked to integrate these analyses into our line and practice. One member in particular, who was also a member of TransAction, led this work. It was an emotional topic for many of us. Sexism and transgender oppression had deeply wounded many of our members. On top of that, we entered the conversation with the misconception that feminism and trans liberation were somehow pitted against each other.

We struggled over how to challenge the gender binary system without erasing the reality of oppression that women face under patriarchy. Through this process, we learned to better differentiate between biological sex and socialized gender roles. We finally came to the conclusion that the gender binary system is a central component of patriarchy, which forces everyone into the narrow social roles of “man” and “woman.”

Put another way, patriarchy oppresses both biological females who live their lives as women and people who live outside of the narrow gender roles that patriarchy prescribes.

We also made errors in our attempts to apply revolutionary feminism, most of which played out in members’ individual practice. Many members did not consistently apply a feminist practice in their work or their personal lives. And the group did not deal well with feminist critique within the organization. STORM, and in particular our leadership, reacted poorly to such critiques because they felt reminiscent of the flawed feminist allegations that had triggered the group’s first major crisis.

These conversations would often get shut down quickly without adequate discussion of their validity. These critiques would then be labeled “gender essentialism” – invalid critiques of men based on a flawed assumption that all men are inherently domineering. And these critiques, usually of men of color, would often be equated with racist feminism.

And even with our political critique of patriarchy and sexism, we had no way to intervene when members engaged in sexist behavior in their personal lives. This contributed to an organizational culture where it was difficult to explore questions around feminist practice. Some members feared the likelihood of intense and emotional struggle if they raised feminist critiques. They worried that they would be targeted as divisive or as “attacking leadership.”

Within the organization, we failed to place sufficient priority on, or invest adequate organizational resources in, the theoretical development of women of color in the group as revolutionaries. In particular, the women of color in STORM’s Core did not receive the mentorship or support that they needed to reach their potential as Marxist thinkers. As a result, men and white people were our most developed theoreticians, reflecting and replicating the oppressive dynamics of the educational system.

Finally, while we believed that fighting women’s oppression must be central to revolutionary work, most of our actual mass work focused almost exclusively on issues of race and class. While we worked to develop women of color as leaders and to fight sexism within the movement, our work rarely challenged patriarchy in society as a whole.

**Lessons:** A truly liberatory revolutionary feminism must be based not only on an analysis of women’s oppression, but also on deep analyses of white supremacy, capitalism, imperialism, heterosexism and transgender oppression. We have to challenge the sexism embedded in most of the Marxist world, as well as the racism, classism and reformism of mainstream white feminism.

It is important to uphold a feminist analysis at all levels of our work. In

doing so, we must actively challenge the tendency to uphold feminism in word while undermining it in practice. Even when we are trying hard to promote feminist analyses and practices, it is easy for a gap to exist between our intentions and our practice.

Allowing either obvious or subtle sexist and patriarchal gender dynamics in an organization to go unchallenged is a critical error. We need to open space for explicit conversations about the dynamics of sexism and feminism in our organizations, in our work and in our lives. And we need to understand that challenging sexist behavior supports the development of revolutionaries of all genders.

To truly uphold revolutionary feminism, an organization should incorporate a genuinely feminist practice. It should support and develop the leadership of women, especially women of color and working class women. And it should engage in mass work that challenges the oppression of women – particularly women of color and working class women – in society at large.

## Style of Work

**Experiences:** Hard work, militancy, and an emphasis on popularizing revolutionary ideas characterized STORM's style of work.

STORM members often put everything we had into our political work. Our commitment to the fight for total liberation was undeniable. It inspired us to accomplish much – even feats that others told us were impossible. But it also led to extreme burnout and fatigue for many members – sometimes damaging their long-term capacity to engage in revolutionary work.

STORM's street militancy was one of its defining characteristics. It was also what attracted many members to the organization. Sometimes we were rash, and we took to the streets without a fully developed plan. But our willingness to express our rage passionately was crucial to the organization's success.

In retrospect, our passion should have been balanced by deliberate thinking, especially in planning and evaluation. But it helped to create momentum and movement. In our best moments, our passion activated the networks we had helped to build, inspiring broad action at times of crisis.

STORM worked hard to make revolutionary ideas accessible to everyday people. Having been turned off by the newspaper-and-rhetoric style of other left organizations, we worked to translate revolutionary ideas into more popular language and style. We often drew on hip-hop as a resistance-oriented culture that was relevant to working class youth of color. Many of our members both came out of and helped to build the radical hip-hop activism that now defines Bay Area resistance (e.g., protest chants based on hip-hop lyrics, incorporating hip-hop and culture into our actions and organizing).

We were often successful in our attempts to make revolutionary ideas broadly accessible. But we also vacillated between two errors. Sometimes, we would use classic left jargon. This tended to alienate the everyday people we were working with. Other times, we would oversimplify ideas in an effort to make them easy to understand. Nuance and meaning got lost in translation.

Despite our errors, STORM made significant contributions towards an accessible and relevant articulation of revolutionary politics.

Our style of work was also characterized by a high level of discipline. By “discipline” we mean a willingness to subordinate one's own needs and desires to those of the group. We pushed ourselves beyond our fears and apprehensions – whether we were afraid of organizing, public speaking, studying or any other challenge. We also worked to overcome the individualistic and destructive tendencies that we are taught in this society.

There were also many flaws in our style of work.

Our most common error was arrogance and self-righteousness – into which we fell all too often. Although not the practice of all members, this arrogance sometimes led us to mistreat people in the movement,



alienating them from our organization and our politics. It also often closed us off to constructive and potentially helpful feedback.

Whether with comrades, critics or other revolutionary collectives and trends, we often were dismissive or overly combative. Internally, though, we were often overly harsh and self-deprecating when we engaged in self-criticism.

We were also frequently defensive. This defensiveness prevented us from proactively dealing with discontent and criticism. Instead of addressing criticism in a principled and straightforward manner, we would sometimes dismiss it as flowing from a lack of ideological development or as mere jealousy, envy or “hating.” Our defensiveness developed in reaction to past attacks on the organization. These attacks inspired a “bunker” mentality in the organization. We heard most critiques as attacks – attacks we needed to fight against. This made us more enemies than friends. And even our friends were sometimes unwilling to raise critiques directly, fearing the blowback.

STORM also made voluntarist errors. In other words, we often acted as if we could move beyond the limits of the current historical moment through the sheer force of our will. This led us to often work past the point of burnout. We felt the weight of the world upon our shoulders and tried to push the movement faster than it could go.

We tried to correct some of these errors, particularly around arrogance and defensiveness, by creating mechanisms to help us engage in self-reflective dialogue with the movement and learn from our mistakes. See “Building the Movement,” above.

**Lessons:** Building revolutionary organization is hard work. So is building a successful movement. These things require a great deal of commitment. Revolutionaries must work hard, and they must work collectively to get them done.

But hard work alone can’t get it done. The fight for liberation will be long. We must develop sustainable work practices. If “work as hard as you can” is our only mode, we will burn out and be unavailable for the many years of struggle ahead.

Revolutionaries need to be militant in street actions. As leaders in the fight for liberation, we should be role models of fearlessness before the state and the oppressor.

It is both possible and necessary to make revolutionary politics accessible to people from oppressed communities. We should set a strong left (but not ultra-left) pole in all arenas of our work. Revolutionaries should engage in reflection and dialogue to ensure that they are not promoting politics so far left as to be irrelevant to their base or incapable of really impacting society.

Revolutionaries need to guard against arrogance, defensive and voluntarism. We must prioritize revolutionary humility and openness to critical feedback.

## Revolutionary Discipline

**Experiences:** STORM had some good practices – like semi-annual criticism/self-criticism sessions and clear Codes of Conduct and Security Protocols – that facilitated collective discipline and helped create a healthier group culture.

STORM’s Codes of Conduct and Security Protocols were an important attempt to challenge many common problems in the movement, like shit-talking, liberalism and oppressive behavior. They helped STORM members understand what it means to be a disciplined revolutionary. The Codes and Protocols gave us shared principles to which we could hold one another accountable.

But members didn’t always uphold the Codes of Conduct and Security Protocols. And we did not have sufficient mechanisms for holding members accountable for unprincipled behavior. Neither did we have an intentional plan to help members develop revolutionary discipline over time.

Outside of their political work, many STORM members had poor individual practice at times. Though not committed within STORM itself,

these errors negatively impacted the organization's development. But STORM had no way to intervene in members' unprincipled revolutionary conduct in their personal lives.

At times, members did not openly communicate their frustrations with each other, letting them fester and hurt the group.

These errors impacted the organization even more seriously when committed by STORM leaders, who had an outsized impact on the organization.

Additionally, STORM's conception of how to encourage principled behavior and discourage unprincipled behavior was too limited.

We did not have formal mechanisms or an organizational culture that promoted emotional health and healing. We saw these areas as people's personal issues. But there were many times when members' emotional challenges manifested as bad political practice and caused crises in the group's political work.

Beyond their emotional health, STORM did not intentionally address the relationship between members' personal life situations (e.g., financial well-being, job status, family situation) and their participation and development within the group.

STORM was ultimately unable to manage or resolve these internal contradictions.

**Lessons:** Having clear codes of conduct helps an organization to build an intentional group culture. One challenge in this is holding members and leaders equally accountable.

Recognizing that popular bourgeois American culture is individualistic and anti-collective, revolutionaries need to engage in intentional processes to learn how to uphold shared codes of conduct. We cannot expect to transform into completely principled revolutionaries overnight.

Dealing with personal conduct is political. It is organizational business.

We need to articulate explicit guidelines and expectations for correct practice for revolutionaries in the mass movement. This should be an area of regular dialogue and feedback.

In a group with different personalities and experiences, open and honest communication is critical. It is important to have mechanisms that provide revolutionaries with the space to deal with criticisms in a productive, proactive way. While we must protect people from attacks, we must not shield them from criticism. This is especially important as it relates to leaders (both formal and informal).

Revolutionary organizations must create structured spaces to help their members work through emotional challenges and to address the political contradictions in its members' personal lives. Organizations should strive to do this without being overly invasive.

Revolutionaries also need to be self-reflective and dialogue openly about the political impact of their personal lives. Whether it's the residue of past trauma or one's current life situation, this is part of who we are as political actors.

### Outstanding Questions

- How does a cadre organization strike a balance between political work and healing work? Between discipline and support?
- How do we do the amount of work that it will require to build a cadre organization and the mass movement in this country and still put enough time into our lives and families?
- How do we build camaraderie and collective support systems? How do we cultivate interpersonal solidarity?
- What is the appropriate role of a cadre organization in holding people accountable for their individual behavior? In helping them work through their personal challenges (e.g., burnout, emotional issues, their own oppressive behavior or abuse of privilege)?

## Romantic Relationships between Revolutionaries

**Experiences:** Romantic and sexual relationships often cause interpersonal tension and conflict. This can (and too often does) have a profoundly destructive impact on political organizations. STORM certainly fell victim to this.

STORM's founders attempted to help the organization avoid these conflicts. They included in the group's initial Codes of Conduct a warning against "unraveling at the zipper." The Codes instructed members to take special care in romantic relationships with other comrades. We interpreted this as cautioning members to be very deliberate when partnering with other STORM members and to be extremely careful when potentially painful situations arose (e.g., a couple breaking up and one person considering a new partnership with another member).

This rule was not a ban against romantic relationships inside the group. (That kind of rule would probably fail in any tight political community of young adults.) And we did not expect the rule to prevent complicated situations. But we felt it was important that members be reminded to take special care and consideration.

Having this code gave the entire group a heightened awareness of the potential dangers of messy romantic relationships in a political organization. It also provided a mechanism for holding our comrades accountable. Both of these were important political steps. But they still did not prevent such messy situations from arising. Despite the Codes of Conduct, the group went through many crises arising from unhealthy and unprincipled romantic relationships between and among comrades.

For example, during STORM's first Rectification Period, a core leader and founder of STORM left the organization because of interpersonal tensions with her former partner. Her former partner was engaged in overlapping romantic relationships with her and with another member. The departure of this leader, one of STORM's only trained Marxists (and the only trained woman of color), left a vacuum in ideological and tactical leadership. It also represented a significant loss of organi-

zational memory.

Example Two: At the beginning of STORM's second Rectification Period, a General Member and a Core Member partnered. The Core Member had an ex-partner in the Core (though he was on temporary leave). This resulted in the permanent departure of the former partner and interpersonal rifts which undermined the political cohesion of the Core.

These examples show the profoundly negative political impact of personal relationships.

STORM did have a mechanism to help navigate these difficult situations – the Mediation Team. The Mediation Team was activated in moments of intense interpersonal crisis in the organization. It was responsible for communicating with the involved members, facilitating conflict mediation meetings and suggesting organizational responses (e.g., organizational discipline or entering into mutual agreements). The Mediation Team ate up a great deal of time and energy (usually from the organization's female leadership – members who were already stretched thin).

The Mediation Team was able to keep interpersonal tension and conflicts from escalating into organization-wide crises that could have threatened the group's existence. But it was not always able to secure the continued membership and participation of all the people involved. STORM lost a significant number of members due to these kinds of interpersonal crises.

STORM had no mechanism beyond our Codes of Conduct for preventing the development of crisis situations in members' personal relationships – even when impending crises were clear to other members. We were thus left to manage the aftermath of problems that had been developing for a long time. Many members have a critique of this "crisis management" orientation to problems in interpersonal relationships. They favor a "crisis prevention" approach. But none of us has a clear vision of what a non-invasive "crisis prevention" model might look like.

**Lessons:** It is important for revolutionaries to understand and appreciate the impacts of their personal and romantic lives on their political work and on the collective functionality of their organizations.

While revolutionaries will inevitably go through cycles of partnering and breaking up, they must take care and consideration in how they do it. They must work to create the best possible conditions for maintaining group cohesion and camaraderie. This requires honesty and open communication between and among everyone impacted by these relationships. It requires care and deliberation when entering into new partnerships with comrades. It requires a commitment to maintaining healthy and non-oppressive partnerships between comrades. And it requires a commitment to maintaining political camaraderie even in the midst of a break-up (in other words, no typical, destructive break-up behavior).

The personal life of a revolutionary is not just his or her “personal business.” Revolutionaries should be open and accountable to their organizations and to the movement for their conduct in their personal and romantic lives. Revolutionary organizations also need back-up mechanisms (like STORM’s Mediation Team) to respond to unpredictable interpersonal crises.

**Outstanding Questions:**

- How do revolutionary organizations help members avoid politically destructive crises in their personal and romantic lives without being overly invasive and controlling?

**Political Security**

**Experiences:** STORM’s Security Protocols gave our members a helpful roadmap to maintaining security from government infiltration and disruption. These Protocols were helpful in the context of our movement, where we tend to underestimate the destructive and disruptive powers of the government’s counter-intelligence programs.

We believed that it was important for a revolutionary political organization to maintain its security from government surveillance. We also believed that – even if there was not a high degree of government disruption in the current period – developing good security practices now would prepare us for higher levels of government disruption later.

Many of the practices that we developed – like learning not to joke about government surveillance or violent criminal activity and learning to be cautious in our use of telephone and e-mail communication – are valuable tools for serious revolutionaries. Still, members did not always maintain these practices.

But the importance we placed on security led to a level of secrecy about our work that left many people in the movement wondering what we were doing. Revolutionaries always have to engage in a balancing act between security and transparency, and we don’t think we struck the correct balance.

Our level of security was probably out of step with objective conditions. We sometimes acted overly secretive and paranoid (mainly because we were developing security practices for the first time). This paranoid behavior heightened concerns in the movement.

**Lessons:** Revolutionaries should maintain a high degree of security awareness and practice in their work, even in periods of low activity. This will prepare us for periods of greater government harassment.

On the other hand, revolutionary organizations need to be as open as possible about their political work (like organizational strategies) that impact the broader movement. This does not mean organizations should reveal detailed organizational business (like membership lists or organizational structures). Some matters should be kept confidential from the government and other opposition forces.

We need to ground our security practices in a concrete understanding of the real historical conditions and the needs of the movement.

## CONCLUSION:

### Closing Words to Open the Conversation

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We hope that this document helps our allies understand our history and our politics. We hope that it communicates the lessons we have learned from our experiences so that other revolutionaries don't have to learn them the hard way. And, most importantly, we hope that it will provoke discussion and debate among many political trends and generations of revolutionary activists.

This summation is not meant to be a final word. It is an opening to a conversation that will help us all develop a deeper and more complicated understanding of cadre organizations and their role in the liberation movement.

We welcome your questions, comments, and reflections; we have much to learn from our comrades. We are also open to participating in organizational dialogues and public events about this document and on the question of revolutionary organization in general.

We have been honored to work with and learn from each other and our allies in the movement. We thank you all, and we are excited to continue to work with you to build the movement and to build revolutionary organization.

We have not lost our belief that our people need a powerful and fierce mass movement to fight for our freedom. We have not lost our faith that this movement is possible. In fact, we see that movement growing and maturing every day.

And we have not lost our commitment to building strong, relevant and accountable revolutionary organizations that will serve the needs of that movement and help it become a powerful revolutionary force.

We have many hard questions to answer and much difficult work ahead. But we have a deep and unshakeable faith that – together – we will win.

**Hasta la victoria siempre!**

