

SOCIALIST PARTY USA LOCAL ORGANIZING HANDBOOK



2010/11

Introduction

How to Organize a Socialist Party USA Local

Locals are the lifeblood of any socialist organization. They are where we learn about politics, where we create our organizing plans and how our national organization is given life at the local level. By connecting members with concrete political organizing and useful educational efforts, Socialist Party USA (SP-USA) locals can increase in size and effectiveness. Each action we take to build the SP-USA should serve to strengthen our communities, make our worksites more democratic and inspire in people the hope that a better future is possible through grassroots political struggle. This is what our Locals do best.

Despite the importance of locals, organizing one may seem like a confusing process. This handbook is designed to take you step-by-step through the process of organizing and sustaining an SP-USA local. It includes details about the national organization's requirements and useful tips from people experienced with organizing for the SP-USA. Organizing takes some time and a lot of patience, but our locals are an essential part of making transformative political change possible.



Basics

How to Start- Organizational requirements

Before getting to your organizing strategies, have a look at the national organization's requirements for locals. The SP-USA Constitution permits two ways for Locals to be chartered.

- 1) In unorganized states the National Action Committee or National Committee can charter locals.
- 2) In organized states the State Executive Committee or the State Convention can charter a new local.

In all cases, you will need at least five members in good standing willing to sign a charter application.

The National Office can provide you with the proper forms to file for recognition.

Getting Organized- Count your numbers

The first step in organizing an SP-USA local is to count your numbers. Find out how many people would immediately be interested in joining or how many people are already members of the SP-USA. Think about activists who may be organizing in single-issue campaigns, such as healthcare, anti-war or economic justice and/or those on your worksite or at your school. They might already be interested in participating in a broader socialist political project. Equally important are those who have directly experienced the oppressions of capitalism but may not have experience as organizers.

Offer the Party as a space to acquire the skills necessary to create a better world based on the values of cooperation, compassion and self-determination.

Contact the National Office or a Nearby Local

Once you have looked around locally, send an email to or call the National Office and ask whether there are currently any members of the Party in your immediate area. You might be pleasantly surprised to find either members or people who have contacted the Party recently. Nearby locals may have gone through a similar process of organizing and may be able to offer practical advice as well as resources, such as handbill and pamphlet templates, sample by-laws or ideas on how to organize.

Find a Place to Meet

Socialist locals meet in all kinds of places – member’s homes, coffee shops, community centers, libraries, and even the back table at a fast-food restaurant. Be sure the space is safe, easily accessible by public transportation, accessible to people with disabilities and, preferably free. Consider a space that is also child-friendly. Your local should be an organic part of the community and children should be welcome. A box of crayons and a few sheets of drawing paper can go a long way towards sending the message that our movement is based on solidarity. The best space is one that can be used on a consistent basis so people begin to know where to find a socialist meeting.

Start Talking to People

Start talking. Attend any local demonstrations or political events in your area. Talk to folks on your worksite. Get an idea of what people in your area care about – ask questions and listen more than talk. Then, take a look at the SP-USA program. Find issues that intersect with ideas that concern people locally. Whether it is unemployment, healthcare, the war or environmental justice, socialists have something useful to contribute to the discussion.

Organize Your First Meeting

There are two options for your first meeting. If you have enough people who are already members or who wish to join immediately, then hold an **organizational meeting** where members and those who are interested are invited. If you are organizing alone or with only a couple of others, organize a **public meeting** on a topic of interest. Here is information on both types of meetings.

Organizational Meeting

The organizational meeting gives structure to the local’s organizing efforts. Eventually, different members may be working on different projects, so the organizational meeting is needed to keep other members informed. Items like official resolutions, new organizing projects and the next movie showing are discussed at organizational meetings. All of the basics of a meeting are necessary – an agenda, a chairperson, an agreed upon system of voting and someone willing to take minutes.

says Billy Wharton, Chairperson of the Socialist Party of New York State, “for the rest of us hospital visits mean facing medical bills and debt. The seriousness of this outbreak requires that access to medical care be provided to all New Yorkers.” Therefore, SPNYC calls on the Mayor to respond directly to the threat by enacting a comprehensive public health initiative.

Appendix 5: Meetings

Organizational Meeting Guideline

Sample Agenda:

Call to order

Introductions

Membership check (identify voting member/ members in good standing)

Choose recording secretary and chair

Read and approve prior minutes

Agenda review and approval

Brief announcements and communications by Secretary

Reports

Old business

New business

Good and Welfare

Next meeting

Public Meeting Guideline

Greet attendees as they arrive

Introduction by Party Chair or other officer

Pass around sign-up / contact sheet

Main presentation (speakers, movie, etc.)

Pass the hat/ fundraising collection

Q&A

Announcement of Party activities and upcoming events

Appendix 6: Minutes

General Format for Minutes

Starting time

List chair and secretary

Attendance list

Lists topics of discussion

Highlights of oral reports and discussion

Motions and votes (or results of consensus)

List upcoming meetings and events planned

Ending time



Introductions- Don't assume that everyone knows each other. Begin each meeting with introductions. Have each person say their name, position in the local if they have one, and for new people, how they heard about the meeting. Consider also doing an ice breaker activity if the majority of people have not met, like asking people what their favorite food or TV show is. Don't forget to have a sign-in sheet available.

Agenda- Make sure that people agree on the agenda. Note the date, time, and location of the meeting on the agenda. Make the first item “additions and approval of the agenda.” While approving, you may also want to put a time-limit on the length of the meeting. We recommend that meetings last no longer than one hour and a half in order to not overtax participants. List the items you will discuss in the meeting. Be sure to include, at the end, plans for the next meeting.

Officers- Part of the structure required by the national is officers. Officers include a chairperson, a secretary and a treasurer. You may wish to elect “temporary officers” until the local is chartered the elect formal officers at your first formal meeting.

- i. **Chairperson** You may choose to have this person act as chair for local meetings or rotate the duties between people. The chair keeps the meeting orderly, ensures that the agenda is advanced and that the meeting is run democratically.
- ii. **Secretary** Communication with members in between meeting, transcribing minutes and answering e-mails is important for locals to remain functioning. These are all responsibilities of a local secretary.
- iii. **Treasurer** Since fundraising is usually an important part of a functional local, be sure to elect a responsible person as

treasurer. The treasurer will handle the local's funds and should provide periodic reports to local organizational meetings.

Voting System- Be sure to agree on a system of voting. Some locals use majority rule, others consensus (100% agreement) and others mix the two – looking for majority on some issues or consensus on others. Whatever system you choose, be sure that people agree on it, understand it and that new people are informed of the process.

Minutes- Minutes are the notes taken during the meeting. You may choose to have very formal minutes or a more informal style. Whatever you choose, make sure that your notes are easily understood and accessible by all members. A typical officer's list includes the position of Secretary; you may want to make this person responsible for taking and distributing minutes. (See Appendix 6)

Jurisdiction of the Local- Think carefully about the geographical space your local claims. If you claim a space that is too small – The Socialist Party of Walnut St. – it will stifle your ability to grow. Alternately, claiming a vast expanse – The Socialist Party of the Northeast United States – will make meeting in person difficult and prevent collective decisions and action. Be sure to consult the National Office when thinking about the area you wish to organize in.

Goals - The goals of your first organizational meeting should be two fold. First, at the end you should aim to have worked out the way in which your local will run internally. This includes, as mentioned above, elected positions, voting systems, etc. It also includes a plan for submitting the proper paper work to the state party, National Action Committee or National Office to have your local chartered. All of this might not be done by the end of your first meeting. If it is not, you should, at least, have a plan on how to achieve these goals. In other words, if you have decided on an election procedure, but you have not had the chance to vote for elected positions, a plan should be in place to carry out the vote.

The second goal should be a plan to start organizing. If your members are already involved in organizing projects, this may mean simply discussing strategy inside those projects. However, it also means organizing outward oriented activities for your local, such as public meetings. Once you have the agreed upon the internal processes of the local, the sooner you start engaging in organizing the better. Pick a date for a public meeting, think about a coalition your local might want to join, or the campaign you wish to initiate.

Appendix 4 – Model Press Release

For Immediate Release

[Title]
Socialist Party USA, NYC Local Calls for Swift Action by New York City to Combat Swine Flu Outbreak

[Date and Location] Wednesday, May 20, 2009 New York, NY - During his Tuesday, May 19th, 2009 press conference New York City Mayor, Michael Bloomberg urged New York City residents exhibiting Swine Flu symptoms to seek medical attention regardless of their immigration or health insurance coverage status. However, Mayor Bloomberg and the New York City Department of Health failed to address the medical bills the city's uninsured will incur by taking their advice. The Mayor fails to address the serious problems many residents face in accessing healthcare. The Socialist Party USA, NYC Local (SPNYC) calls on the Mayor and Department of Health to address the Swine Flu outbreak with swift actions that protect all New Yorkers. **[Quick Summary of the reason for the release – for an event be sure to include all the details right away]**
[main text that summarizes the problem, argument, issue or event – justify why this is important]

The SPNYC calls for free distribution of all preventative materials, the opening of free testing centers at all NYC public hospitals, a moratorium on billing for all swine flu related medical care, and the free distribution of Tamiflu and other swine flue treatments. Enacting this plan will provide all New Yorkers with healthcare necessary to treat the Swine Flu. Combatting the Swine Flu is about treatment not just containment.

According to a New York 1 report, New Yorkers seeking testing for the Swine Flu have been turned away from New York City hospitals because currently only the Department of Health can administer Swine Flu tests. Instead, people are being urged to treat their symptoms as they would the typical flu-- with rest and fluids. This response, in conjunction with the countless New Yorkers not seeking medical attention due to lack of health insurance, does not adequately address the public health threat posed by the outbreak.

[pull-out quote from a representative of the local or state org – sometimes the media will not contact you, but will use your quote in a larger story so be sure to include one] “Access to healthcare is no problem for a billionaire like Michael Bloomberg,”

users to become fans of your organization. Promote your group broadly and try and accumulate as many fans as possible. The more you have, the wider the audience will be of those receiving your messages.

The idea with an organizational FB page is basically the same as your webpage. Keep the content fresh and have one person or a group of people checking it regularly. FB's event section is particularly useful for organizing purposes. Be sure to send out invites at least a week prior to the event.

FB also has organized groups. Generally the groups are used for single-issue causes or events. Groups are a great way to popularize the local's messages and events. Leave links in relevant groups that link back to your website or FB account.

Other Networking

Locals report positive results with advertisements on Meetup.com, via Craigslist, MySpace and through many other sites. The success of any one site is often determined by regional appetites. Experiment widely until you find the right formula for your local.

Networking Your Online Resources

Your local's entire online presence should work in some logical network. Whenever possible, different sites should be linked – users should be able to move easily from your Twitter to your website to your FB account. Think about how the different parts can relate with one another.

Do Not Get Lost in Cyberspace

Having an electronic presence can really help your organizing, but there is nothing better than a good old face-to-face meeting or a phone call. The computer is another level of mediation and, as a result, you may lose people in the mix. Keep a steady flow of person-to-person organizing and supplement it with your online presence

Appendix 3- Important Contact Information

National Office

Mailing address: 339 Lafayette St. #303 NY, NY 10012
Office Phone/Voice Mail – 212 982-4586
Cell Phone – 201 803-7574
e-mail – natsec@socialistparty-usa.org

There will be more on this in the next section and in section 3, Sustaining Your Local.

These two goals will mostly be the same two goals for all organizational meetings once your local is formed. You will always be working on both organizing the local and organizing the community.

Public Meeting

Public meetings help locals contribute to the community. These meetings can take the form of holding public discussions on critical issues, sponsoring left-wing speakers and showing progressive movies. Sometimes, you will want to examine a local issue of concern, while other times you may wish to bring a national campaign or perspective to your local area. Either way, the following tips are essential in order to organize a successful meeting.



Use National Resources- If you are close enough to the national office or another local, contact them. They may be able to send a speaker with expertise on a particular issue to speak at your meeting, or the national may be able to provide you with enough information for you to be the speaker at the meeting. For instance, the national just produced a Healthcare Organizing Packet that was designed to allow members to speak with authority about the healthcare reform movement.

Decide Democratically- Make sure that you involve the greatest number of people in the decision about what public meeting to hold. Ideally, you would do this at an organizational meeting. However, if you haven't organized the local yet, you could also gather people

together for a planning meeting to throw out ideas and come to a decision.

Make a Flyer/Email Announcement- To make the meeting a success, you will need to spread the word. Flyers, email and phone lists are key resources. A flyer can be made using Adobe Photoshop, InDesign, PageMaker, Inkscape, Open Office or even Word. Keep it simple and direct. Include all important information, such as the date, time and transport directions. The less “wordy” the better. The same goes for email announcements. Be sure to utilize the electronic resources listed later in this handbook.

Outreach- Post your flyer everywhere. Areas with high foot traffic, such as coffee houses, supermarkets, universities and transport hubs, are key. Organize phone banking for really important meetings. Turn outreach into a way to involve more people in the organizing.



Also, you might try getting some space in a local newspaper or community radio station. Be aggressive and advertise broadly!

The Meeting- The general structure of the public meeting is to have a member chair the event, have the speaker present and then do a Q&A. If you are showing a movie, be sure to have someone welcome the crowd, introduce the activities or ideas of the new group and facilitate the discussion afterward. Be sure to allow time for questions, as they are a key participatory part of the meeting. Think about your follow-up meeting before this meeting and announce it at the end. Be sure to collect everyone’s contact info on a sign-up sheet – names,

Appendix 1- Daily Activity Checklist

- check the email at least once a day
- make sure the website is updated at least once a week
- Send out a Tweet
- Think about what meetings are coming up and how you can help promote them
- Reach out to one new person
- Post some flyers for an upcoming meeting

Appendix 2- Using Social Networking Sites

Twitter

Here is a basic introduction to Twitter. Twitter allows you to communicate both individually and to other communities. Twitter is kind of like Facebook, but at a faster pace. The more you update, the more attention you receive. Each entry is forgotten in 30 seconds, so keep them coming fast and furious. Witty political analysis and inane observations are equally welcome, since they all draw attention.

Just click in the box under “What’s Happening” and start tweeting. Hashtags (#) allow individual users to associate their messages with broader Twitter communities. Take this message for instance: Socialist meeting in Nome next week #socialism #nome #alaska Anyone who searches for the word socialism will then see your entry. Put as many hashtags as you can think of to spread your message more broadly.

Individual users can then contact you directly. Let’s say someone with account name johnsmith wants to ask you about the next local meeting. They could contact you like this (click on the @nomesocialists button on the right): @nomesocialists hey when’s the next meeting?

You could reply to @johnsmith. Type in this: @johnsmith hey! Next Friday, 1:00pm at the coffeehouse

These are the basics. It’s nice because it is really about free association. Twitter is useful to draw attention to the local and even to coordinate actions and share information at large demonstrations. Find other SP-USA members on Twitter and follow their feeds.

Facebook

Facebook will allow you to create a slightly more ongoing relationship with its online “friends.” Officially, if you are a group you are supposed to set up a page and not an individual user account. Pages allow FB

organizing projects around. Divide labor to encourage democracy and avoid burnout. Learn to rely on each other, trust each other enough to act democratically and practice the kind of basic solidarity necessary to create a democratic socialist society.

A fully operational vibrant local cannot be built overnight. It is important to have certain pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will when it comes to socialist organizing. For every 10 people who might offer to volunteer only one may actually show up. Revel in the small victories, be persistent and seize opportunities when they appear.

Make sure that people in your community know that the SP-USA is there to struggle side-by-side with them in order to improve the lives of all working people. Make your local into an asset for your community, a point of struggle in your workplace and one small piece of the larger revitalization of radical politics in America.

The SP-USA is a multi-tendency democratic socialist organization. Our locals are the mechanisms to reach this lofty goal. Radical democracy is not only an abstract concept; it is the way we run our locals on a daily basis. By making our political work a part of the everyday life of working class communities, we will be better able to make real on the promise of creating a society based on equality, peace and justice. Build a Socialist Party USA local today!



phone numbers, home and email addresses. The best way to do this is to ask people to “sign in.” Try to have quality personal conversations with people who seem interested.

If the public meeting goes well, try to have an organizational meeting to form the local. Or, have another public meeting with the goal of organizing the local soon.

Goals- Here again, there should be two goals. The first goal should be to create a space where knowledge about the given issue is shared and people can openly discuss and learn about the issue. Ultimately, the purpose of this is to help build a campaign around the issue so that people both involved and not involved with the party can organize together to make the world a better place.

The second goal is to build the party. If this is your first meeting, and you are trying to form a new local, the public meeting is a great way to raise interest in the party. Show that the new local is doing good work that relates directly to local needs and that it is a democratically-run organization. This will attract people to the party. Hopefully, by the end of this meeting you will have enough people interested that you will be able to hold an organizational meeting.

Remember, don't be too heavy handed; be clear that the local organized the event and that it intends to organize around the issue, but be open and flexible, this will attract members and sharpen your campaign. Don't be afraid to ask people who seem interested, if they want to participate in the local.

Like with the organizational meeting, these two goals will more or less be the same for all public meetings. You will want to share knowledge and organize around the issue. Doing so will attract people to the party.

Sustaining Your Local

Now that your first meeting has been a success, it is time to keep things rolling. If your paperwork has been approved, you can begin to organize as a local. If not, you can create an informal “socialist organizing committee” until you have the five members necessary to file for official status. Either way, here are some steps that will help you sustain your political work.

Building Infrastructure- It is vital that people know that the local or your organizing project exists. Word of mouth is crucial, but you should also have an electronic presence.

Contact Lists- Make sure that you keep a thorough contact list of everyone you meet. This list should include names, email addresses, phone numbers, and addresses. You may want to divide the list into two sections, one for members and one for “contacts.” Programs such as Open Office or Microsoft Excel can be useful tools for maintaining and organizing this list. Included in this list should be the contacts that you have already gathered and continue to gather at your meetings. You should also be committed to gathering the contact of each new person you meet as you organize. The larger your contact list is, the more broadly you will be able to publicize your events. Your contact lists will also enable you to remain in contact and cooperate with other activists working in your area.

Email- Open an email account in the name of the local. Make the name easily identifiable – if you are in Nome, Alaska make the email name nomesocialists@gmail.com or something just as clear. Load all of your email contacts from the meeting into this account. Use the list function to make mass emailing easier. Be sure to place your email addresses in the BCC column in order to respect the privacy of those who have given you their email and to prevent your list from being used by someone else.

Archive System Develop a method to keep records for your local in both the physical form and online. Google offers a free service called Google Documents that allows for electronic archive and access by multiple users. Be sure to save important documents like your sign-up sheet and any templates you may have.

Mailing Address- Be sure to set up a Post Office Box address for the local. One of the officers should be charged with the duty of picking up your mail periodically. Your P.O. Box will be essential for communication with the national, as well as to prove to institutions like banks that you exist as an organization.

Bank Account/Treasury- The local may decide to open a bank account to deal with funds that are raised and other donations. Be careful to examine the terms of the account closely. Fees and minimum balance requirements can eat away at hard-earned funds. Though it varies from bank to bank and state to state, you will probably be required to open the account as an unincorporated

association or organization. To do so, you will likely need to file for an Employer Identification Number. You can do this over the phone or by downloading a pdf form. Unless you collect a large amount of contribution, you will not have to file tax forms with the federal government. If you sell merchandise, states might require sales tax collection. If the local decides to run someone for elected office, it is vitally important that funds collected and used for electoral campaigning are separated out, through the creation of a Political Action Committee, from funds used for local organizing. Please contact your state government for the appropriate forms.

Website- Websites are an important way for new people to connect to the local. A blog from a site like blogger.com can easily be converted into a website, or you can use Google Sites. Contact the national office to arrange an online training session on how to create and maintain a website. Your website needs a new entry at least once a week, and someone needs to be in charge of updating the “Upcoming Events” section. Keep your content fresh. The Socialist WebZine is updated weekly, so you can always post something new on your site.

Other Media- You may want to create a newsletter for your local to encourage members to write and to spread the news about your campaigns. Turn your address list into a mailing list and keep your contacts and members updated on the local’s activities. You can use the same programs you use to make flyers to create the newsletter. Check with your local post office for information on bulk mailing rates to reduce your postage costs.

Press Release- Media outreach is a useful way to draw attention to your political organizing. An effective press release can both attract a reporter and educate the general public. Be sure to send your release to the media via email and fax and post it to self-publishing sites, such as Indymedia, activist email lists and social networking sites. See Appendix 4 for a model press release.

Twitter/Facebook You may also want to have a Twitter/Facebook presence for your local or organizing project. See below for more information about using these social networking sites.

Conclusion

Keep a Steady Pace- Going forward, try to maintain a steady pace of organizational and public meetings. Always keep an eye for new people to speak with and new issues to create concrete political