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INFORMATION PAPER

THE ROLE OF PROGRESSIVE JOURNALISM IN THE STRUGGLES OF  
NORTHERN CANADA

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## 1. Introduction

When asked to write something for this conference, and to participate in the discussions, I almost declined on the grounds that I could spend my time more profitably in other ways. However, I accepted on the basis that this was supposed to be a serious conference, which would tackle the concrete problems of journalism as an organizing tool in capitalist Canada. I hope my original perception is proven wrong.

This is discussion paper only and has been prepared rapidly in the midst of other work. It is nowhere near complete, but I hope it is useful to others in the journalism business on the left. It arises not so much from long experience in a newsroom, but from some hard months in the "hinterland", being involved with organizing. I am also a member of the Saskatchewan Waffle, and my opinions arise from being involved simultaneously in "field work" with native people, the Waffle, and the Editorial Board of Next Year Country.

## 2. The Need For Analysis

"Objective" and "participatory" journalism are inherently apolitical, and potentially reactionary concepts. "Objectivity", by its nature, means covering a contentious situation from both a progressive and reactionary point of view. "Participatory journalism", where people themselves are given some inalienable wisdom to write what they want in a left-wing paper or magazine, leaves the paper open to "participation" by groups and individuals which have left-wing as well as right-wing opinions and purposes.

It is thus essential for journalists to approach their subjects of writing with a clear mind, and an analysis. Left journals frequently fall prey to the bourgeois principle of letting those in power "have their say", rather than seeing their papers as means to further organize and develop the opinions and organizations of militant groups. Despite its faults, the best example of left journalism in North America is the Guardian. Reading the Guardian is a political experience, not just the mere absorption of information. Although the Guardian suffers from a lack of Canadian content, its purposes and approach to journalism are clear. The distinction between "articles" and "editorials" is necessarily, and creatively, unclear.

By presenting one's analysis in the article one is

writing, a journalist not only presents information, but assists his readership (the most interested people in a news story or feature are the people directly affected or involved in the story) to broaden their conception of themselves and their situation, while at the same time linking, at least in an initial way, the struggle of the people one is writing about to other situations. As a socialist, I believe that one of the major tasks confronting us to link the struggles of the unorganized with the trade union rank and file, and vice-versa. Thus priority in coverage should also be determined by ones analysis.

### 3. Native People

The left is currently beginning a serious debate about its analysis of Canada's native people. One line is that native people are part of the lumpen proletariat and, as such, form a surplus labour pool which stands ready to meet labour shortages arising from time to time under capitalism.

Another view is that we live in an apartheid system, where native people form a separate and distinct caste, which is constantly and heavily exploited when they are allowed to participate in the labour force, and are regularly excluded from employment on the basis of race even when labour shortages occur.

This debate is necessary, since the white left is slowly learning how to draw links with the struggles of native people. Without such an analysis, coverage of native peoples struggles lack depth, and more seriously, a direction.

One concept regarding native people which is receiving general acceptance by the left is that native people constitute a nation, by meeting Lenin's criteria of possessing a distinct culture, language, and economy; all they lack is specific territory. In a future socialist society, we would have to allow for the development of an autonomous region within Canada. This would be analagous to the Mongolian Peoples Republic within the People's Republic of China.

Within such an analysis, coverage and other support work for "aboriginal rights" struggles therefore requires the premise that such struggles can only be tactics comprising part of a strategy oriented towards the eventual demise of capitalism.

### 4. The Necessity of Being Involved In Organizing Work

I would propose that the best journalists are those

involved in direct day-to-day organizing. Organizers tend to be realists, since they confront daily the limitations and potentials of the organizations they serve. If they also become left journalists, they open one avenue for the development of adequate theory, arising from concrete practice. They can use their journalism to develop their own understanding, as well as that of the people they serve. They are also in a good position to receive criticism about the relevance of the content and language of what they write.

This kind of position, I can understand, would be difficult if not impossible to apply from the point of view of a campus newspaper with limited staff and budgets. However, from where I sit in Northern Saskatchewan, it is the only I believe that can work. The experience and lives of northern people are best understood by those in the north. They should be encouraged to integrate their organizational development with theoretical understanding in journalistic endeavors.

Such a position (organizer/journalist) requires considerable time to develop. Few people on the left actually know anything about good journalism, and even fewer are competent organizers. But both of these skills can be learned, and should not be mystified. What is required is a commitment to the objectives of a socialist society, the analysis which leads one to understand the inevitability and the means of carrying out class struggle, and the willingness to learn from the people.

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