

# reform & revolution

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## REVIVING LABOR DURING **THE BIG BURNOUT**

**WORKING CLASS  
EXHAUSTION AND THE  
ROLE OF DEMOCRATIC  
SOCIALISTS**



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# reform & revolution

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## DSA Needs a Course Correction



BY ALEX MONI-SAURI AND STEPHAN KIMMERLE

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DSA is at a crossroads. The revival of labor – the focus of this magazine – depends on active, critical, socialist intervention. As the largest socialist organization in the US, we should also be helping build the movements for reproductive rights, student debt cancellation, and more.

The mood at the DSA National Convention in August 2021 was unconcerned – we’ve been successful; why change anything? The ambitious goals set by the 2019 convention have clearly been abandoned.

**Breaking from the Democrats?** The dominant trends in DSA claim this isn’t an urgent issue because

socialists can achieve electoral success running on the Democratic Party ticket. But if DSA is seen as merely an appendage to Biden and the Democrats, the only voice of opposition is the dangerous Republican right.

**A Rank & File Strategy for labor?** We voted for this in 2019 to kick-start the labor movement and challenge business unionism, but at the 2021 convention, a compromise resolution on labor removed the whole item and prevented us from discussing our approach.

**And DSA’s new National Political Committee?** We were optimistic in our last magazine,

but let’s face it: it’s not off to a good start. The way the NPC handled the discussion about Jamaal Bowman’s Congressional vote for military aid to crush Palestinian resistance was more than disappointing.

But we can turn things around! We need to **make DSA a visible anti-capitalist force**, rooted in the struggles of labor and social movements. We need to **build a strong Marxist wing in DSA** to give our organization the backbone it’s currently lacking. If you like the work of Reform & Revolution, help build DSA, and a Marxist wing within it, with us: [ReformAndRevolution.org/join](http://ReformAndRevolution.org/join)

**In solidarity,**

*Alex Moni-Sauri and Stephan Kimmerle*



# A Battle over Roe v Wade?



BY ROSEMARY DODD

📍 MARXIST\_BARBIE

**The Democrats and the courts won't save abortion. We need a mass movement in the streets, and DSA has a critical role to play.**

Abortion rights, long under siege from the right, face an unprecedented threat in 2022. This summer, most likely in June, the Supreme Court will rule on a Mississippi law that prohibits abortion after 15 weeks, which will likely result in the complete or partial overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*, the 1973 case which enshrined abortion rights until fetal viability (around 24 weeks).

The court has also rejected four attempts to block a Texas law banning abortion after just six weeks (before most people even realize they're pregnant) from taking effect while it's being challenged in lower courts. The Texas law is clearly unconstitutional, so allowing it to stand is a hostile move against abortion law precedent.

In a December hearing on the Mississippi law, the conservative justices, who outnumber the liberal justices 6 to 3, made clear their willingness to gut or even overturn *Roe*. Brett Kavanaugh, a Trump appointee

who ascended to the Court despite sexual assault allegations against him, said, "If you think about some of the ... most consequential cases in the court's history, there's a string of them where the cases overruled precedent."

Chief Justice John Roberts, the most moderate of the conservatives, would prefer to leave *Roe* intact on paper but uphold the Mississippi law, allowing a massive blow to abortion rights, but potentially reducing public outrage and avoiding a hit to the court's already shaky legitimacy. However, the other five conservative justices are much more willing to do away with *Roe* entirely.

"It would take a lot of rose colored glasses to look at the Supreme Court's decision-making over the past year and look at the political beliefs of the current Supreme Court justices and think there's any hope there," argues Max Carwile, a Planned Parenthood activist in Tennessee. She feels strongly that 2022 will see the floodgates open for pre-viability abortion bans. "I don't think they'll completely overturn *Roe v Wade*, but by allowing the [Mississippi] 15-week ban to go

into effect, they will allow *Roe v Wade* to be overturned in part."

This would have immediate, devastating results. Ruling the Mississippi ban constitutional would enable so-called "trigger laws" in 19 states to go into effect that would ban abortion at various points. Bans will hit particularly hard in the South and Midwest where abortions are already difficult to obtain. A shocking 1,336 abortion restrictions have been enacted at the state level since *Roe*.

Abortion, despite being legal on paper, is already inaccessible to millions. The class character of the fight for abortion is clear: rich people will always be able to access abortion by traveling long distances and paying expensive medical bills. Poor people, particularly trans people and people of color, however, will be forced to carry unwanted pregnancies to term or use unsafe practices.

### Where are the Democrats?

In response to the threat from the Supreme Court, House Democrats passed legislation called the Women's Health Protection Act. This bill would codify *Roe* into law and

Art on the right page by **Meg Morrigan**

Meg Morrigan (they/them) is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America and the Reform & Revolution caucus. They are on the editorial board of Reform & Revolution.

# FREE, SAFE, AND LEGAL ABORTIONS



## Bringing Feminism to Labor

The most powerful tool available to working-class people is for millions to withhold their labor and go on strike. Usually, strikes occur over workplace issues. However, there are plenty of examples of strikes over political and social issues too. In Poland, women organized a massive nationwide strike for abortion rights and the largest protests in decades, which temporarily stalled legislation banning abortion.

Although the labor movement in the US is resurgent, we are unfortunately far from a place where labor is prepared to take strike action on issues like abortion. Nonetheless, socialists in DSA should be actively connecting with workers and unions, starting with mobilizations and protests for abortion rights – a healthcare procedure working families need – and building toward strikes in the future.

enshrine abortion access on a federal level. The bill wouldn't solve everything, but would be a major step toward preserving abortion rights. Unfortunately the Democrats, despite controlling the presidency and both houses of Congress, have no plan to actually get it passed.

Not only do conservative Democratic Senators Joe Manchin and Bob Casey not currently support the legislation, but even if they were convinced to sign on, Republicans could easily block it with the filibuster, which requires 60 votes to override.

The easiest tool at Biden's disposal is expanding the Supreme Court and adding more pro-choice justices. Although he spoke about this

during his campaign, he has yet to act.

The ruling class, including both its liberal and conservative wings, has an interest in preserving the legitimacy of its governing structure, yet overturning *Roe* will almost certainly further undermine the Court in the eyes of regular people.

### Expand the Supreme Court and add more pro-choice justices.

The Court already has low institutional legitimacy. According to a 2021 Gallup poll, when asked how much confidence Americans have in the Supreme Court,

only 36 percent said they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence. Additionally, a 2021 Quinnipiac poll found that 61 percent of Americans say the Court is motivated mainly by politics, as opposed to 32 percent who say it's motivated mainly by the law.

Liberal justices issued stark warnings to their right-wing colleagues in an initial hearing over the 15-week Mississippi ban. Justice Sonia Sotomayor asked, "Will this institution survive the stench that this creates in the public perception that the Constitution and its reading are just political acts?"

This is an opportunity for DSA to point out the undemocratic, anti-working-class nature of the Court, call for justices to be elected, and demand that, as a bare minimum, Biden and the Democrats expand the Court to protect our most essential rights.

The Democrats are afraid to lead on abortion due to its supposed unpopularity, but is abortion actually unpopular? Although its opponents are very vocal, according to a 2021 Gallup poll, only 19 percent of Americans oppose abortion in all circumstances, compared to 32 percent who support it in all circumstances, and 48 percent support it in some circumstances.

Additionally, an *ABC/Washington Post* poll found that 60 percent support keeping *Roe* while only 27 percent want it overturned.

Furthermore, we shouldn't view attitudes about abortion as fixed. As with the women's movement that won *Roe* in the first place, a mass movement can have a major impact on consciousness. A bold socialist feminist message, compared to the more tepid arguments of mainstream women's organizations, could significantly alter public perception on abortion.

### Struggle from Below

The massive Women's March when Trump was elected, in spite of its political and organizational limitations, showed that regular people (with sufficient incentive and leadership) will hit the streets in the millions for feminist issues. In response to the Texas six-week abortion ban, 660 demonstrations for abortion rights were held across the country. These were a great step, but they weren't nearly sufficient.

Recent feminist movements in other countries exemplify the kind of sustained movement necessary to maintain and expand abortion in the US. In Argentina, the *marea verde* (green tide) movement defeated the Catholic Church's opposition and won the right to abortion prior to 14 weeks in 2020. This was achieved through a campaign that brought together activists,

women, and the LGBTQ+ community through a combination of community organizing and street protests. The movement, with its supporters wearing distinctive green bandanas, has spread to several Latin American countries and helped decriminalize abortion in Mexico in 2021.

In Ireland a variety of organizations, including ROSA, a socialist feminist group which included the sister organization of DSA's Reform & Revolution caucus, carried on a sustained, high-profile movement that passed a referendum legalizing abortion by 66 percent of the vote. ROSA engaged in civil disobedience by driving through the country, providing safe but illegal abortion pills, and using these high-profile actions to argue for legalization.

Recently, the US Food and Drug Administration reduced medically unnecessary restrictions on Mifepristone, an abortion pill that can be safely administered at home until ten weeks of pregnancy. Many grassroots campaigns are educating people about Mifepristone, and DSA could get involved and perhaps pursue similar tactics to those used in Ireland. Combined with mass protests, speak-outs, labor rallies, and civil

disobedience, politicized aide could help those in need of abortions and raise the profile of the movement.

Saving abortion rights, whether it's pressuring the Democrats to take action or scaring the conservatives on the Supreme Court away from overturning *Roe*, will require massive, sustained demonstrations. However, the corporate establishment of the Democratic Party refuses to call such demonstrations, and unfortunately, the main feminist organizations follow their lead.

The primary impediment to implementing the kinds of tactics necessary to win is not public opinion or the will to struggle, but the lack of adequate organization and leadership. The largest, most influential reproductive rights organizations such as Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice are deeply tied to the Democratic Party. Planned Parenthood endorsed Biden in 2020 and used its money and political capital to elect Democrats, but has not put the same level of resources into mobilizing its considerable base to protest. The strategy of these organizations has tended to be legalistic and focused on developing relationships with the liberal elite rather than a fighting, movement-based approach.

Bernie and DSA Congress members have a good stance on abortion, but they are also not calling for the movement-based



approach needed to defend and expand abortion access.

### DSA's Role

DSA, in contrast, can act independently from the Democratic Party, enabling it to pursue militant tactics, as well as connect abortion rights to a broader socialist feminist program. For example, we should argue that abortion care must be part of Medicare for All and free of charge. In England the National Health Service pays for 99 percent of abortions – a model we can point to.

In addition to fighting for the right to have abortions, socialists can also organize for the right to have children and raise them in a healthy, safe environment. Reproductive justice is a framework that many abortion activists, particularly many Black women, have been emphasizing for years, and it's consistent with a socialist message that society should provide for people's basic needs. Presenting abortion as part of a broader program that includes housing justice, parental leave, Medicare for All, anti-racism, gender equality, and worker rights can draw new, energetic people into the movement and introduce them to socialist feminism.

We sent a draft of this article to DSA's National Political Committee (NPC) and Socialist Feminist Working Group and asked about their plans, but haven't yet received a response or seen a serious strategy from them. DSA showed through the Bernie and PRO Act campaigns that we are capable of coordinated, wide-scale action. DSA's NPC should start a campaign around abortion rights and contact Planned Parenthood, NARAL, NOW, the Women's March, unions, Bernie, and the Squad to organize a day of mass action in the spring to demand:

- 🗣️ that *Roe* is defended and upheld;
- 🗣️ that Biden expand the Supreme Court to uphold *Roe*;
- 🗣️ that Congress pass the Women's Health Protection Act and overturn the Hyde Amendment;
- 🗣️ Medicare for All that includes free, safe abortions, gender affirming healthcare, contraception, and other reproductive care;
- 🗣️ reproductive justice including living wages, affordable childcare, and paid parental leave, paid for by taxing corporations and billionaires.

DSA should organize demonstrations regardless of outside support. If we behave as if losing abortion rights is a foregone conclusion, we will be shirking our responsibility to millions in need of abortion care and missing a massive opportunity to build a fighting socialist feminist movement.

DSA's national leadership should provide graphics and resources to local chapters and organize a national day of action, with a mass rally in New York City and protests across the country. This would set an example of resistance that can be built on. We should invite Bernie, the Squad, and the traditional women's organizations to speak at this rally – and an additional town hall – and pressure them to use their authority and resources to call for much larger demonstrations.

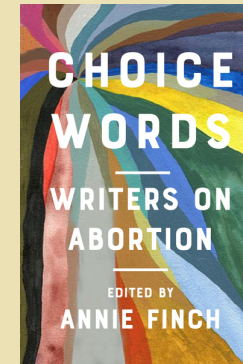
Even though DSA is weaker in red states where abortion is likely to be outlawed, national DSA can pour resources into smaller chapters, sending money, staff, and volunteers to help organize protests and

campaigns to show that people are not giving up reproductive freedom without a fight.

Building a winning movement will require a united front approach that pulls in various groups (big and small) to fight for abortion without sacrificing DSA's independent socialist profile. Some DSA trends may hesitate to work with larger women's organizations due to their limitations (as evidenced by DSA's Socialist Feminist Working Group's refusal to endorse the 2021 Women's March demonstrations). However, this would be a mistake: instead of shunning these organizations, we should be getting them to mobilize their bases into action. Even if the leadership of an organization like Planned Parenthood is hesitant to take up a bold strategy due to its ties to the Democratic Party and its position as a healthcare provider, many of their grassroots supporters and staff would be excited to join a movement in the streets, and many will be open to socialist politics.

As Max, the Tennessee activist, points out: "I think what we need is a true revolt, people taking to the streets every single day and not allowing business as usual until we have true safe legal and accessible abortion, but I am really worried... It feels like we've gone further into individualist thinking when what we really need is to understand that our well-being and future are tied up in each other."

*Rosemary Dodd is a bartender, a member of the Steering Committee of DSA in Portland, Oregon, and a member of DSA's Reform & Revolution caucus.*



### Book Review | "Choice Words: Writers on Abortion"

"A physical, psychological, moral, spiritual, political, and cultural reality that navigates questions of life and death, abortion should be one of the great themes of literature." This observation summarizes the central credo of poet and author Annie Finch's new anthology, *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*. The project began in 1999, following Finch's own abortion – when she looked for literature to help her process the experience, she realized she had read almost nothing about it, and could find no major literary anthology on the subject. The discovery of this absence and the grief that accompanied it started Finch on a twenty-year search for poems, stories, plays, and other writings on abortion, culminating in the publication of *Choice Words* in 2020.

The scope of this collection and the time it took to assemble is both impressive and disheartening – how is it possible that writing on abortion is really that hard to find?

### Art Mimics Life

It's not an absence I had felt before, but on immediate reflection I could only think of a handful of poems by Lucille Clifton and Gwendolyn Brooks, some flashbacks in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and one short story by an author whose name I don't remember. Katha Politt offers other examples in the foreword:

*Think of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, in which working-class women in a pub gossip crudely about a friend who took pills to "bring it off," or Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," in which an aimless expatriate tries to persuade his sweet, passive girlfriend into an abortion she clearly doesn't want. With few exceptions, abor-*

## Literary Omission

BY ALEX MONI-SAURI

📍 A.MONI.SAURI



*tion figures in men's writings as a symbol – of modern alienation, of a larger sterility.*

It's a strong reminder of how art and culture often reflect the dominant ideologies of society under capitalism, which develop from material conditions that both necessitate and confirm them. In this case, at least in the US, the dominant narrative around abortion is that it's a personal problem, a moral problem, something to hide and to shame, something apparently unsuitable for literature.

In the effort to constrict reproductive rights, a common and frequently life-saving medical procedure is criminalized, marked by shame and secrecy, and made dangerous and inaccessible. The isolating, fragmenting effect of this cultural and structural attitude toward abortion is also reflected in its absence from literature.

Against a literary backdrop of silence and narrow symbolism, this book's mission is not just to fill the void but to express a collective nature, a variety of perspectives, circumstances, and outcomes intersecting one human experience.

### The Missing Piece

I was a little jumpy with Finch's introduction: is there a bit of gender-essentialism in her language about the "birthright that naturally arises from our reproductive capacities"? Is there anything about trans and gender-nonconforming people who have abortions? What claims are made about the movement for reproductive rights? Which problems are identified, which steps to take? Is it suggesting only that we need more cultural representation, or more women in office?

Some of these concerns were addressed in Finch's introduction. Trans and gender-nonconforming

people get a mention a couple pages in, as Finch explains that her “prolonged and diligent hunt for literature from writers whose perspectives badly needed to be heard – including imprisoned and transgendered writers – yielded nothing.”

In a point about the role of literature in conversations about abortion, she writes that “[t]he political arguments have been made repeatedly; in some ways there is nothing else left to say, and yet so much more needs to be said.” Here, it seems that the main political strategy available to us is to make good arguments, and literature plays a defeated secondary role of allowing us to express those arguments to each other when they inevitably (“repeatedly”) fail to effect change at the level of policy.

Later, Finch writes that the stigmas and stereotypes against people who have abortions demonstrates “the gulf between women and those who make the laws and precepts,” overlooking the reality of women like Kyrsten Sinema and Hillary Clinton, who help make our laws and precepts.

### Choice Timing

As I was reading *Choice Words*, *Roe v. Wade* was challenged directly for the first time in almost 50 years. In 2021, the US saw escalating attacks on reproductive rights all over the country. According to the Guttmacher Institute, a pro-abortion rights research organization, “[a]s of December 31, 108 abortion restrictions had been enacted in 19 states. This is the highest total in any year since abortion rights were affirmed by the US Supreme Court in 1973.”

This is why I was ready to bristle at the introduction. The

stakes are very high. I feared that, without a framework of Marxist analysis, the effort to capture a multiplicity and represent distinct individual experiences of abortion would abstract the issue too far from its political and economic context, obscuring both the obstacles and the path forward in our fight for reproductive rights.

Such a framework, even if just in the introduction, would identify the structural economic forces that make this procedure so difficult, restricted, criminalized, or forced upon people in the first place, and could meaningfully transmute feelings of personal shame and isolation into a collective experience, pointing to collective struggle.

So much of the pain expressed in this anthology is the pain of social stigma, secrecy, and shame; the feeling of being faced with impossible choices, of not having a choice; the pain of powerlessness, poverty, and patriarchy. This is the experience not just of abortion, but of abortion under capitalism. I wanted a frame that would hold these voices in context and name our right to safe, accessible abortions as the class issue that it is.

It would be boring to suggest that every piece of art and cultural product be evaluated for its most obvious political or propagandistic potential – we would have a world of political cartoons and echoing op-eds that nobody would like to live in. Literature can be measured by its contribution to our daily lives as working people. Is it available, accessible, enjoyable? Does it offer solace, humor, joy, a sense of solidarity, a form of escape? Does it speak to its audience, or does it speak down?

### The Role of The Book

On this basis, *Choice Words* makes a great case for itself. There’s work from Langston Hughes, Lucille Clifton, Anne Sexton, Amy Tan, Ursula K. Le Guin, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lindy West. The range of genres and forms included makes it very dynamic, and it’s thoughtfully organized but doesn’t require a linear read; it lends itself equally well to flipping around as to reading straight through. This is one way I imagine it could have a powerful impact: leafed through in waiting rooms of Ohio clinics, where donated copies will be distributed thanks to a Kickstarter campaign with nearly 500 backers.

In a section of the introduction called “Vision for the Role of This Book,” Finch explains her hopes for the impact this book could have “in the form of three concentric circles: individual experience, collective understanding, and social change.” As such, it does a great job of capturing the idea that abortion is as natural and as nuanced as any matter of life and death; it does not do as good a job of identifying the systemic mechanisms that so effectively weaponize a common medical procedure. Such a perspective would light up this collection with purpose and political clarity. For now at least, Finch leaves the question open.

#### Choice Words

Writers on Abortion  
Edited by Annie Finch  
April 2020

haymarketbooks.org/books/1459  
420 pages, \$29

*Alex Moni-Sauri is a poet and artist, and is a member of Seattle DSA. She lives in Kingston, Washington.*

## Slicing and Dicing Democratic Rights



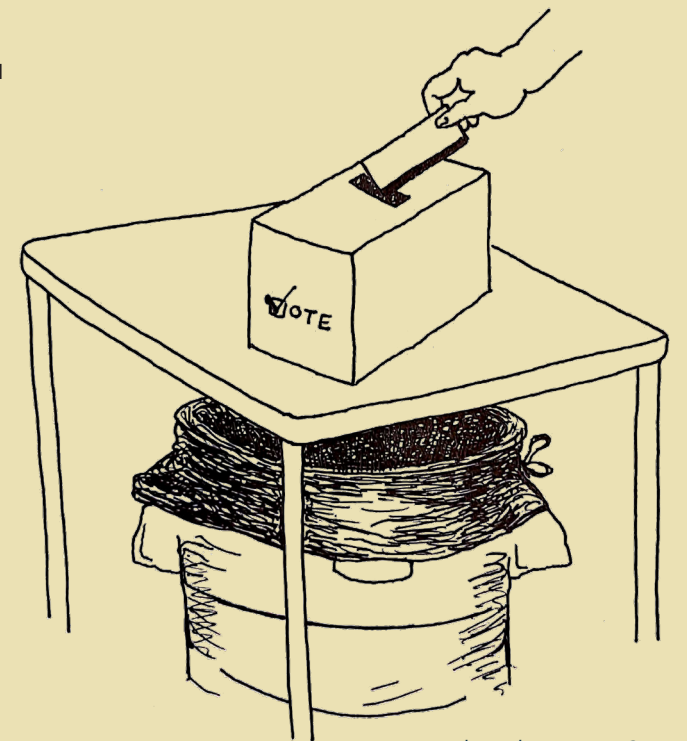
BY MEG MORRIGAN

### The Racist History of Voter Suppression

Since the beginning of the Reconstruction Era, a concerted effort has been made to restrict and suppress Black voters. Even as the 13, 14, and 15th Amendments were ratified – ending slavery in the US, extending citizenship to everyone “born or naturalized” in the United States, and prohibiting states from restricting a person’s right to vote based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude” – state legislatures began to impose voter qualification laws that, while on the surface seemed racially neutral, in practice worked to disenfranchise the Black vote.

These became the basis for Jim Crow laws and racial segregation throughout the South. But even the overturning of these racist laws during the Civil Rights era did not end attempts to marginalize the voices of people of color. Instead, as federal legislation became more explicitly inclusive, reactive state propositions became more subtle in their language, but no less nefarious in their purpose.

Literacy tests became English proficiency requirements. Voter ID laws targeted communities of color. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the 1975 amendment to protect language minorities



Art by Alex Moni-Sauri

were watershed moments of progress, but they have been all but completely overturned as of 2013 with *Shelby County vs Holder*, which overturned preclearance – the system by which jurisdictions with a history of racism were required to gain federal approval before changing their election laws. This decision has set the stage for the last decade of increasing voter suppression, especially among the Southern states.

### Communities of Color Disproportionately Affected

In Georgia, the Election Integrity Act of 2021 (so named to indicate the bill was a response to the supposed fraud of the 2020

election) signed into law by Governor Kemp in March 2021, completely overhauls the election process of the state. The bill criminalizes giving out food and water to people waiting in poll lines, when Black and Brown communities throughout Georgia frequently suffer hours-long lines at the ballot box. It outlaws mobile ballot boxes that are placed at pre-set locations – something that was done only in Fulton County, which has the state’s highest Black population. It limits drop box locations and creates identification requirements for mail-in ballots, both policies directed at creating obstacles for voters of color, young, working class, and other marginalized voters, while

expanding early in-person voting and other practices that benefit older, richer, whiter, more conservative voters.

SB-1 in Texas also introduced a wide range of restrictions that target racially diverse Harris County, where innovations such as 24 hour and drive-thru polling stations, which the county introduced during the 2020 pandemic, have been outlawed. The bill also creates onerous voter ID requirements for mail-in voting, curbs the abilities of candidates or groups to provide absentee ballots, creates new requirements for voters who use an assistant, and more – all policies that disenfranchise BIPOC, disabled, working class, and other marginalized voters.

*States are being sued by civil rights groups, but we can hardly depend on the courts.*

The Montana Ballot Interference Prevention Act (BIPA) passed in 2020 epitomizes legislation aimed at making voting harder for Native Americans. Montana faces unique challenges when it comes to conducting elections due to the far flung, rural population in the state, which makes in-person polling incredibly difficult and mail-in ballots a near necessity. But Native Americans face even greater barriers. Many reservations and most rural parts of Montana have limited access to

postal services, often having no home mail service, shared postal boxes, and long drives to post offices. In these conditions, tribal communities have developed organized get-out-the-vote efforts that involve distributing and collecting ballots and delivering them to the election offices. However, these practices are now being restricted under BIPA, making voting nearly impossible for many.

**A New Civil Rights Era**

While there is indeed a worrying trend of voter restriction, this does not paint the whole picture. Many other states passed legislation expanding access to voting in 2021, creating a dichotomy between states. There have been multiple attempts in 2021 and

already in 2022 to pass progressive voter rights legislation at the federal level. These acts, had they been passed, would have gone a long way towards cutting the legs out from under the states' restrictive bills, guaranteeing federal protection of access to voting. But the future is quite grim for voting rights or any other progressive legislation in the developing shadow of the midterms. Of course, many states are being sued by civil rights groups over their heinous bills, but we can hardly depend on the courts, which have been stacked with Republicans for years, to rule unfavorably towards their political allies.

We can't act as if the Democratic Party is a real ally to the multiracial working class – in fact Democratic Senators Sinema and Manchin have been two of recent history's biggest civil right obstructionists, refusing to support filibuster reform and consequently killing any hope of Senate passing the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

Citizens United and the unlimited power of Super PACs won Biden his presidency, and the Democrats depend primarily on corporate lobbyists, not the working class, to pass their policies. A democratic system where every person got one vote would necessitate the abolition of the electoral college. The disproportional representation of the Senate creates an undemocratic power imbalance. Most people have no democracy in their workplaces – where they spend a third of their lives. The media is owned by corporate interests and generally promotes pro-capitalist, pro-status quo propaganda. Working, poor, and oppressed people need an inde-

pendent political body that is beholden to and fights for them.

Nearly six decades after the height of the victories of the Civil Rights Era, with many of the achievements of that time having been gutted, rolled back, and declawed, we are back to fighting for basic enfranchisement for all. It just goes to show that every little concession that is wrought from the hands of the ruling class must be constantly fought for, struggled over, again and again in the face of Capital.

As socialists we defend democracy, and the ongoing suppression of voter rights in the US is a threat to what little democracy we have. Not only must socialists fight for the enfranchisement of all under the current system, but we must fight for legislation that attacks and abolishes these undemocratic institutions. We should agitate in favor of legislation that enshrines voting rights, but we should also push for the PRO Act and other pro-labor legislation that makes organizing in the workplace more powerful and effective.

We should fight to overturn Citizens United and get lobbyists and capitalist interests out of the government. Passing reforms such as these would help the multiracial working class become more conscious of its power, come together as an independent political force, and eventually give us the strength to be able to create a workers' government, a more direct democracy wherein the true needs of the multiracial working class can finally be served.

*Meg Morrigan (they/them) is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America and the Reform & Revolution caucus. They are on the editorial board of Reform & Revolution.*

## Election Fraudulency

According to the Brennan Center, a progressive institute in New York, 2021 was a banner year for voter restriction legislation. There were more than 440 bills introduced in 49 states that contained provisions that restrict access to voting, and 34 laws in 19 states were passed. If these seem like staggering numbers, it's because they are; 2021 saw the most voter restriction laws of any year since 2011 when the Brennan Center began tracking that data. These laws have been introduced overwhelmingly by Republican legislators, often in direct response to the "Big Lie" of election fraud that led to the January 6 raid on the Capitol Building.

While these laws might not "hack, but slice" away at access to the polls, the aggregate effect is millions of people's voices are being silenced, and the majority of them people of color. This is being done intentionally to disenfranchise BIPOC people, working people, and younger voters, and encourage poll results favorable to older, whiter, more conservative voters – the Republicans' base. These racist attacks on our democracy are the true sources of election fraudulency.

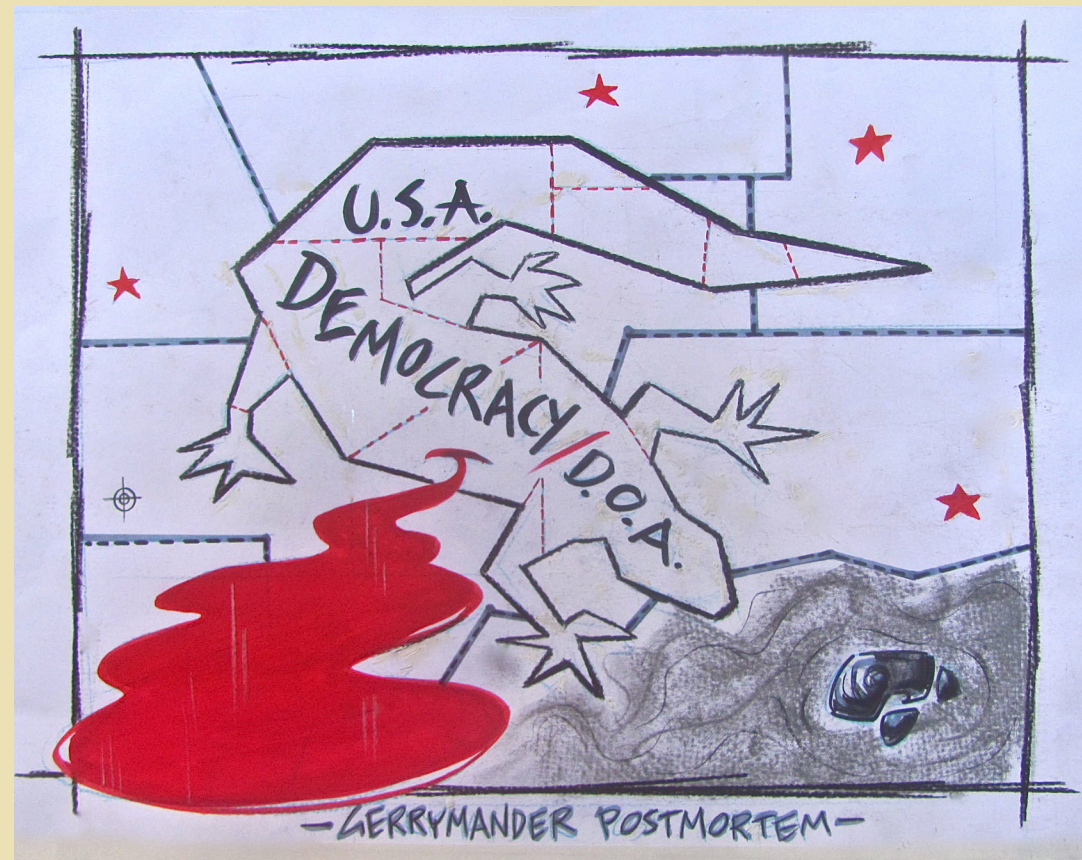


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# Green Imperialism: The Latest Stage of Capitalism



BY SEAN CASE

**From the forests of the Congo, to the salt flats of Chile, to the hills of central Idaho – the struggle for control of the minerals of the future heats up.**

The mainstream US press does a lot of hand-wringing about China’s increasing market dominance of cobalt and lithium, two minerals needed to produce the batteries used in electric vehicles (EVs). Outlets like *The New York Times* frame that dominance through a new Cold War lens, fretting over the erosion of US hegemony. Socialists understand that whether mining operations are Chinese state-owned enterprises, US-based and funded conglomerates, or massive multinational corporations, they all run roughshod over the backs of working and poor people, especially in the Global South.

In order to achieve a green future worth living in, our energy transition must be democratic and free from profiteering. The mineral wealth – and indeed all natural resources – of any country must be controlled by its working and poor people, held to strict safety and environmental standards, and be managed on the basis of need, not profit.

## Congolese Cobalt

The Democratic Republic of Congo is by some metrics the wealthiest country on Earth, as it sits on an estimated \$24 trillion of untapped mineral deposits, including more than two-thirds of the world’s cobalt. China has all but cornered the market. In 2016, American mining giant Freeport-McMoRan sold two massive cobalt mines after, ironically, making some bad investments in fossil fuel projects. The buyer of both mines was China Molybdenum, a state-owned mining company. The sale was shepherded by an investment firm co-founded by Hunter Biden.

The average Congolese citizen lives on the equivalent of \$2 a day. China Molybdenum, and Freeport-McMoRan before them, try to frame their operations as a win-win; they get massive profits from processing and selling minerals, and in return they promise much needed infrastructure for the Congolese in the form of wells, roads, and schools paid for by the company, not to mention the jobs provided by the mine. But such gifts—many of which will likely never materialize—obscure the damage, both already done and ongoing. Villages, forests, and farmland were leveled to build mines like Tenke Fungurume. Tax regula-

tions and poor enforcement make cobalt mining extremely dangerous, especially in the “artisanal” mining industry that thrives in the shadow of larger operations.

In order to feed themselves and their families, many Congolese men (and children) dig for cobalt on the outskirts of Tenke Fungurume and other cobalt mines. Payment is far below market rate and collapses are common. Gécamines, Congo’s state-run mining company, which owns a partial stake in many of the country’s mining operations and is responsible for setting and enforcing safety regulations, has for decades lined the pockets of government officials at the expense of mine workers and the Congolese people at large.

## Latin American Lithium

While the battle for the cobalt market seems destined to resolve in China’s favor, the battle over another essential mineral for green technology – lithium – is more complex. Some of the largest and most strategic reserves of lithium are in Central and South America; specifically, in Chile, Bolivia, and Mexico. Here, the companies vying for market dominance butt heads not just against one another, but against the established and emerging left-wing govern-

ments that run these countries. While these governments don’t truly challenge the capitalist system, their efforts to use at least some of their nations’ wealth for the benefit of their people is completely unacceptable to their nation’s ruling classes and corporations backed by imperialist states like the US and China.

Over the past year, lithium prices have shot up over two-hundred percent, a trend that has foreign governments and corporations eager to extract and refine the salt-flat-embedded mineral salivating.

In Mexico, president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), recently introduced constitutional reforms that, if passed, would begin to reverse decades of damaging privatization in the country’s energy industry that has enriched multinational corporations and stuck working class Mexicans with expensive energy bills and unreliable service. The reforms call for lithium and other strategic minerals to be taken under state control. These reforms set up a tense battle between the various political parties in Mexico, not to mention foreign governments and corporations eyeing Mexico’s vast lithium stores.

Unfortunately, AMLO’s nationalization plan has a wrinkle – a loophole for existing licenses for lithium extraction and production. A 250,000-acre concession, run jointly by Britain’s Bacanora Lithium and China’s Ganfeng Lithium, could prove a useful wedge for the forces of capital to roll back AMLO’s nationalization efforts, if they pass. Half-measures on nationalization are dangerous; leave an opening, and capital will claw its way back.

Though a relatively small and poor nation, Bolivia sits on

twenty-five percent of the world’s known lithium reserves. Currently, eight foreign companies – half of them Chinese – are vying for government contracts to extract and refine the valuable mineral. Lithium is at the center of politics in Bolivia. The right-wing coup against democratically elected president Evo Morales in 2019, swathed in disingenuous concern about election fraud, was at its core about control over Bolivia’s mineral wealth.

Morales’s Movement for Socialism Party is now back in control of the government, with president Luis Arce winning in a landslide election in October 2020. But the short-lived right-wing presidency of Jeanine Áñez had the likes of Elon Musk, whose company Tesla requires massive amounts of lithium-ion batteries to keep up production, chomping at the bit to gobble up Bolivia’s lithium. We’ve likely not seen the last of this power struggle.

Chile is perhaps the most hopeful – and most volatile – arena of struggle for the minerals of the

future. On the back of a popular uprising in 2019 led by youth and the working class, a new, democratically elected constitutional convention has formed, with a draft constitution expected this summer. In December of 2021, Gabriel Boric of Social Convergence, a left-wing coalition party, won the presidency; he’ll take office in March. Once the workshop of neoliberalism, Chile now seems poised to be the leading edge of a new Pink Tide in South America. In both the drafting of the new constitution and the presidential transition, lithium looms large.

President-elect Boric has vowed to create a national lithium company. Currently, the Chilean lithium market is dominated by two private companies. The outgoing right-wing administration of Sebastián Piñera – hopefully the dying flame of the Pinochet era – is attempting to award 29-year lithium mining contracts to private bidders before Boric takes over. Both Boric’s party and their supporters are demanding such bids be suspended. Failure to win that demand could be a huge blow to





Boric's plans to nationalize the industry. Many members of the constitutional convention are also keenly focused on lithium and its potential for both national enrichment and environmental degradation.

Chile has always built its economy on resource extraction; first through copper and coal, now through lithium. In the Pinochet era, the wealth produced by those resources enriched Chile's ruling class and the multinational companies who supported them. The task for Boric, his party, and the constitutional convention is to forge a future in which any resource extraction benefits the Chilean working class and poor, and to balance that extraction against further environmental destruction. A successful effort to nationalize the country's lithium reserves – not to mention other natural resources – is a crucial first step to realizing that future.

## Resistance

But simple nationalization is not enough. Democratic control of all resources and industries is our best hope for averting climate catastrophe. Organized movements can bring this demand to the fore. From the Congo, to South America, to the South Pacific, and within the US itself, popular local resistance to greedy mining interests and national governments is a constant.

In 2019, a protest movement in the Bolivian province of Potosí successfully forced the government to cancel a large lithium contract with a German company; the protesters' central demand was greater local control of lithium projects.

In January of this year, indigenous communities in Chile's Atacama region won a court-ordered suspension of a \$61 million lithium mining contract

awarded to Chinese company BYD.

In New Caledonia, the dangerous and environmentally destructive Goro nickel mine – which Elon Musk is currently seeking to purchase – has for decades been disrupted by strikes and sabotage from the indigenous Kanak community, who make up most of the mine's workforce; they're not buying Musk's promises to clean up the industry.

In Yellow Pine, Idaho, an American mining company is seeking approval of an open-pit gold mine that would produce antimony for a Bill Gates-backed battery manufacturing startup. The local Nez Perce tribe opposes the mine, saying it threatens to further decimate an already struggling Chinook salmon population, an important animal to the tribe spiritually and economically.

Similar stories accompany just about any mining operation.

## A Just Transition

Barring unforeseen scientific and technological breakthroughs, minerals like cobalt and lithium will have to be extracted from the earth for humanity to transition to renewable sources of energy. But allowing that extraction to be controlled by profit-seeking corporations—be they private or state-owned—will further enrich many of the same people who got us into this mess, while further impoverishing and emiserating the working and poor people of the world. A just transition requires working-class control of natural resources and democratic decision making about their use.

Downstream industries must also be democratically controlled. Car manufacturers – from China's BYD to the US's Tesla – pursue the expansion and ownership of mineral wealth in the Global South with the goal of putting an

electric car in every driveway, regardless of the social and environmental devastation they engender along the way. Meanwhile, those same car manufacturers will fight tooth and nail against efforts to expand public transit.

Capitalism requires economies to expand in order to survive. Under such conditions, mining companies must extract as many minerals as quickly and as cheaply as possible to increase production, leaving little incentive to implement robust worker and environmental safety measures. Similarly, battery manufacturers must pump out as many batteries as they can to supply a rapidly expanding market for EVs, whose manufacturers must produce as many cars as they can to keep up with competitors.

Though the final product of this process is a vehicle that emits zero greenhouse gasses, an incredible amount of waste and pollution takes place along the way. Mining operations are inherently destructive to the environment and typically rely on massive gas-powered machines. Battery and car manufacturers are building huge factories and warehouses made from carbon-intensive materials like concrete and steel. Most of these buildings are connected to grids powered by gas and coal.

A socialist economy would replace the chaotic, competitive spiral of capitalism with collaboration. Rationally planned economies could prioritize public transportation, build energy grids powered by renewables, adopt emissions-cutting construction standards, and revolutionize our agricultural industries, all while recognizing that all these pieces fit together and are crucial to forging a livable future. Technology sharing – across industries and between nations – would replace capitalist notions of intel-

lectual property. Perhaps most importantly, socialist economies would understand that the planet is not something to be subjected to our wills, but rather a complex system of which we are merely a part, and which can provide all we need so long as we organize production sustainably.

Socialists must counter the myth that EVs and beneficent billionaires will dig us out of the hole headed to climate catastrophe. Imagine a world where the wealth and manufacturing capacities of private car and battery manufacturers, mining companies, and fossil fuel companies are taken over by the people to produce green public transit and energy infrastructure for all, rather than flashy commodities that generate profit for the ruling class.

A world in which rural communities from the Congo to Idaho don't rely on massive mining corporations for basic infrastructure like roads, electricity, and fire departments, but instead democratically determine their own vision of what their communities can and

should be building with their own collective wealth. Such a world is possible, but will require local, national, and international movement building.

Leaders from Gabriel Boric to Bernie Sanders should use their status and power and foster these movements. Socialists and organized labor around the world must stand in solidarity with indigenous communities fighting mining interests that seek to recklessly rip minerals from the earth under the guise of powering the "green revolution." A revolution waged by tech billionaires and monolithic corporations backed by bureaucratic governments isn't a revolution at all; it's green-washed imperialism. As socialists, we seek a green revolution driven by the working class.

*Sean Case is line-cook and proud parent to a dog and two cats. He's a member of Seattle DSA and the Reform & Revolution caucus.*

*Art by Sean Case*



# Expropriate the Big Landlords



BY NELLI TÜGEL

**Berliners vote to take big landlords into public ownership. Politicians will try to ignore the clear cut vote on the referendum, but the movement is preparing to organize against that response.**

On September 26, 1,035,950 voters in Berlin agreed to take the big landlords into public ownership, by a vote of 59 per cent vs 38 per cent. The huge success of the referendum in Germany's capital was a result of years of organizing and struggle by the housing movement. Politicians are threatening to ignore the result but the movement knew from the start that this vote would only be one step in the overall struggle to win affordable housing for all.

The initiative to expropriate *Deutsche Wohnen* (which was founded in 1998 by Germany's largest private bank, Deutsche Bank) and other large landlords started in 2018 with the aim of socializing the holdings of large real estate groups with over 3,000 apartments in Berlin. The initiative specified that these properties should be democratically managed through public ownership, including the participation of apartment staff, tenants and broader society. It also would prohibit the re-privatization of these units and limit the level

of compensation payments to the affected housing corporations and their stockholders.

*This was, from the start, an organizing campaign.*

Berlin has a complicated referendum process. As a first step, more than 77,000 signatures were collected in 2019. A Social Democratic minister in Berlin's government delayed the whole process by an entire year before granting approval for the second stage of the referendum. Signatures then had to be collected again. This time more than 175,000 voters, corresponding to seven percent of Berlin's eligible voters, were collected. After achieving that success, the initiative was placed on the ballot for all voters to decide.

## Privatizations of Homes - by the Left!

Ironically, a large part of the *Deutsche Wohnen* portfolio comes from the privatization of the former public housing group, GSW. These privatizations were implemented by the Berlin coalition government of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and a predecessor of today's Left Party, Die LINKE, then called PDS (Partei des

Demokratischen Sozialismus, or Party of Democratic Socialism). This "left" government sold around 70,000 apartments to private investors in 2004 for 401 million Euro. In 2010 the company that owned those homes was listed on the stock exchange and in 2013 it was taken over by a large real estate company and landlord, *Deutsche Wohnen*.

The initiative "Deutsche Wohnen & Co Enteignen" ("Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen and the like") demands the transfer of at least 240,000 apartments back into public ownership using Article 15 of Germany's Basic Law (its Constitution), which enables socialization through transfer into common ownership. This section of the basic law was written into the constitution in 1949 as a concession to the left and the socialist mood in broad layers of society - but had never been used until now. (It's a different process from using eminent domain, or nationalizing for infrastructure projects.)

The corporate media fumed after the referendum, with the conservative newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* writing that the vote endangered the 'social market economy', the German term for what they claim to be a tamer more social capitalism. The daily newspaper *Welt*



Protest in Berlin, March 2019: "Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen and the like"

Photo: Uwe Hirsch, [tinyurl.com/dwenteignen2019](https://tinyurl.com/dwenteignen2019), Copyright: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/)

acknowledged that 'obviously not just deluded radicals' voted for the expropriation and had to admit that the initiative managed to establish a 'broad societal consensus.'

## A Campaign Rooted in Previous Struggles

Berlin has seen sharp increases in rents over the last decade. Especially in the course of the financial crisis, Berlin, with its low housing prices by international standards, became the object of financial speculation. This also affected apartment blocks formerly built as social housing.

Berlin already had a lively housing movement in the 1980s, including a lot of squatting and tenant organizing. Over the last ten years, a new wellspring of bottom-up tenant organizing against large scale landlords developed. Tenants in big building blocks confronted with neglect

and rising costs learned to stand and fight together.

Yet for many activists, these struggles – often focused on a particular apartment complex – dealt only with the symptoms of the problem, not its root cause: housing as a commodity in the hands of financial speculators. From the conclusions drawn through these individual struggles and with support from the radical left the idea of a referendum received more and more support. In the campaign, the experience of many activists came together. For example, a key organizer of the hospital workers' union ver.di at the university clinic Charité, who fought for better staffing and wages, played a key role in the battle alongside activists involved in a left electoral challenge in 2006.

Organizing skills developed in the labor movement were implemented not just to mobilize people, but also to organize activists into small groups

in every "Kiez", (a Berlin term for a housing block or neighborhood quarter.)

Yet all political parties except Die LINKE (the left party) opposed the referendum. The conservative CDU, the liberal FDP, and the social democratic SPD mobilized against it. The SPD argued that they have better alternatives, and stated they won't implement the expropriation. The Green Party's top candidate for the Berlin regional parliament elections said in the run up to the referendum she would vote for it, but not implement it, and instead would use it to pressure the real estate industry for a better deal. But Die LINKE supported it and a substantial number of its members got actively involved in the campaign.

Major trade unions like IG Metall (the union of workers in car, machinery, steel and other industries), as well as Germany's largest public

sector union, ver.di, expressed their support for the referendum. (They did not do much more than post a statement, though their support was still important in winning the campaign.)

One of the first successes of the campaign was a cap on rents implemented by the SPD-led government in the regional state of Berlin in January 2020. Under pressure by the housing movement and in desperate search for arguments not to support the expropriations, the SPD agreed to a measure that included strict rent control over rent increases and a maximum rent that in some cases forced landlords to reduce rents. But in March 2021, the national Supreme Court invalidated that law. Though a blow to the overall movement at the time, it also invalidated the so-called “better alternatives” promoted by the SPD to shield the big landlords from the referendum.

### Some Secrets of Success

Bringing together the experience of tenant, labor and political struggles and key activists with roots in certain neighborhoods and networks was one part of the success. Another important part was clearly naming your enemy. Giving the referendum a name targeting the biggest landlord in Berlin, *Deutsche Wohnen*, helped tremendously. Many people in Berlin really hated them.

Equally important was the exact language and structure of the referendum itself: The call for expropriation was radical enough that people understood that this was a fundamental change that went to the root of the problem and could have a big, lasting impact.

The call was framed in a way that assured people that it

could succeed. The fact that expropriation could be implemented through reliance on Germany’s Basic Law resulted in a successful appeal to several different audiences that made the struggle realistically winnable.

*It would be the first time in decades that the left could successfully question the role of private property.*

It was clear from the start that this campaign could not be won with just promises, from politicians or other models of representation where a few people fight on behalf of others. This was, from the start, an organizing campaign. Door knocking was a technique that wasn’t used much in Germany over the last few decades but was rediscovered in this campaign, as new activists got educated in canvassing. Questions to people at the doors about electoral support were always connected with the suggestion of getting themselves involved in grassroots organizing.

### A Success, but Not Yet Victory

Due to the complications of the laws on referendums in Berlin, it is still up to Berlin’s next government to implement the result of the referendum. Since the election in September, the SPD, Greens and Die LINKE have been discussing whether to continue their regional coalition government. This would make the SPD, which opposed the referendum from the start, again the main force in the regional government in Berlin.. The new mayor in Berlin, the

SPD’s Franziska Giffey, has already declared that the question of expropriating private properties is a red line she will not cross.

Clearly pressure from below will need to be ramped up again. There are a few hundred activists at the core of this campaign and several thousand around them worked consciously to build it. Can they pull it off again? Discussions in the movement reflect this increasing pressure and raise the larger question of whether this coalition of radical left activists and a broader layer of the working class will last.

This would be the first time in a long time that a movement from below would be able to deliver visible improvements in the lives of the wider working class. In fact it would be the first time in decades that the left could successfully question the role of private property and go on the offense against it. If the *Deutsche Wohnen & Co Enteignen* referendum is ultimately successful, it will help change the balance of forces, and not just in Berlin. If successful, the question of expropriating large scale private property, nationalizations and socializations can be raised much more easily in many other cities in Germany and around the world plagued with rising rents and the lack of affordable housing. This can spill over to other parts of the economy, especially areas of human needs like health care or transportation.

But if it fails to be enforced, there will be a price to pay for social movements in the whole of Germany.

*Nelli Tügel works as a journalist and is a supporter of “Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen”.*

# A Joint Strike Movement

BY ARNOLD STRUTHAHN

## Berlin hospital workers connected to the housing struggle to win major concessions through a six week strike.

In August and September 2021, when the campaign to take the largest landlord companies in Berlin into public ownership peaked, and the national and regional state election campaigns ended, healthcare workers in Berlin used the opportunity to fight for safe staffing, better working conditions and higher wages. Strikes in the following weeks forced the employers to make significant concessions.

Public hospital workers at Berlin’s Charité and Vivantes worked with privatized workers in those institutions on how to use this heated period of struggle over the housing referendum. Despite being separated by different companies and bargaining units, around 30,000 workers fought to connect the struggles for high quality healthcare and affordable housing.

For the nursing workers, the slogan “Better staffing, even before the elections” targeted the politicians running the public hospitals. Hospital support staff (janitors, laundry workers, cooks, etc.) demanded the same wage level as at other regional states outside of Berlin under the

slogan “Same wages for same work.”

Uniting healthcare and support workers in one bargaining movement made the difference. The political impact of simultaneously targeting politicians and healthcare managers had an impact on discussions all over the city.

There was widespread awareness of the hard work of nurses

together in the public debates especially in the last weeks of the elections. Politicians had no way to avoid addressing the needs of working people for both affordable housing and high quality healthcare amidst a pandemic. Hospital workers spoke at rallies of the housing campaign, while activists of the campaign to nationalize big landlords gave speeches on protests of striking hospital workers.

The movement building and organizing approach activated workers to give them a decisive role in their struggle. Many representatives of small bargaining units worked in close connection with the bargaining team to ensure the voice of the rank and file were heard.

The successful result not only won concessions from management, but provided the working class the experience of developing organizational skills and the solidarity of standing together.

Lower paid hospital support staff workers, often treated as less important in such struggles, saw the overall impact on hospitals that shutting down essential services produced. Realizing they really are “essential workers” will ensure future battles can develop at a higher level.

*Arnold Struthahn lives in Berlin.*



Poster of the public sector union for the strike movement: “Without us, there is no clean scalpel for the operation of YOUR granny.”

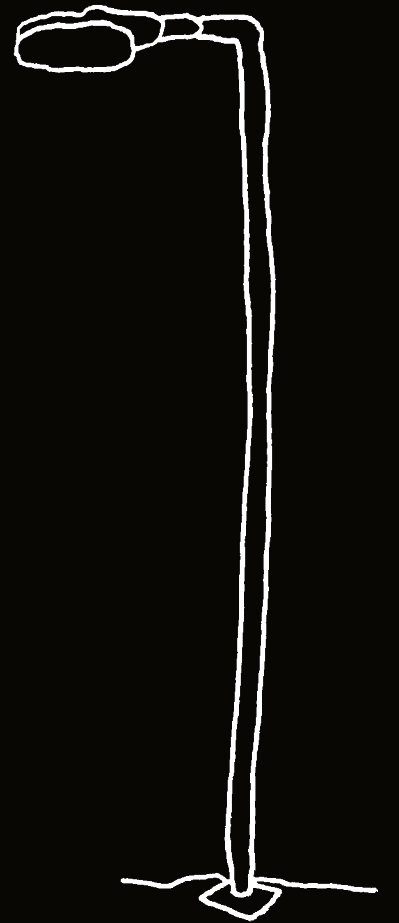
and other staff during the Covid pandemic among the general public. After receiving plenty of symbolic appreciation of their work, the workers now demanded to see real action.

### Democratic Organizing

The housing referendum campaign and the movement for better staffing and wages came

LATE FROM WORK

THE BUS GOES BY  
IT'S FULL OF FOG  
AND PEOPLE'S HEADS  
A LITTLE SWAYING  
SOME AWAKE



BY ALEX MONI-SAURI

@A.MONI.SAURI

# The Big Burnout



BY TY MOORE

f /TYTYMO77

The combination of a tight labor market, rising working class anger, and the growth in left militancy in some unions all point toward the huge potential to revitalize the labor movement. At the same time, the pandemic has exhausted and isolated millions of workers, and most labor leaders are failing to seize

the moment. To map out an effective strategy forward, socialists need to be sober about the challenges ahead.

Last October, as the US left buzzed about the the #Strike-tober uptick in work stoppages, The Guardian published an op-ed by former Labor Secretary Robert Reich head-

lined “Is America experiencing an unofficial general strike?”

Reich’s question, of course, was more click-bait than serious prognosis. But his article still reflected the exaggerated hopes many on the left were feeling. Connecting the historic number of workers quitting their jobs, the bosses’ hand-wringing over the so-called “labor shortage,” and the uptick in strikes, Reich optimistically suggested that “American workers are now flexing their muscles for the first time in decades.”

*“No one calls it a general strike. But in its own disorganized way it is related to the organized strikes breaking out across the land [...]. Disorganized or organized, American workers now have bargaining leverage to do better. After a year and a half of the pandemic, consumers have pent-up demand for all sorts of goods and services. But employers are finding it hard to fill positions.”*

Reich is right to highlight the huge leverage workers have in this economic moment, but his optimistic spin was premature.

Jane McAlevey, the famed guru of labor organizing, was more sober in her December article in *The Nation*, “How Workers Can Win in 2022.”

McAlevey points out that “In 2021, through November, only 76,000 workers participated in large work stoppages” compared to “more than 485,000 workers” in 2018, meaning last year mainly continued labor’s long decline and “doesn’t come close to what is required to create the scale of crisis that will force the corporate elite to negotiate with the working class in significant ways.”

“Instead [of mass collective action], labor’s discontents have been channeled into individual actions, like quitting,” McAlevey explains. To be fair to Robert Reich, alongside his understandable excitement about #Strike-tober, he also flagged the bigger story of American labor in 2021. “My take: workers are reluctant to return to or remain in their old jobs mostly because they’re burned out.” Indeed, a June poll by the job site Monster.com found 95 percent of workers were thinking about quitting their job and “burnout” was the top reason cited.

## The Big Quit

Each month since April last year around 4 million workers – 3 percent of the US workforce – have quit their jobs, rising to a high of 4.5 million in November. That’s an all-time record, and substantially more than the previous highs around 3.5 million per month in the two years before the pandemic.

All summer business leaders made shrill demands to end Covid relief benefits, blaming them for the “labor shortage.” But the “Big Quit” only accelerated as summers’ end saw 7.5 million workers lose their pandemic unemployment checks. So what’s really going on?

At first the media was filled with stories of tech professionals quitting their jobs, buying tricked-out camper-vans and choosing the simple life, but these feel-good stories obscure the larger reality. The viral social media posts of workers telling their bosses to “take this job and shove it” paints a more accurate picture.

While every empowering quit-story deserves cheers of solidarity, the hard facts paint a grimmer picture of Covid capitalism than any of the contending media narratives. It’s also the most obvious explanation. Labor Department data shows the jobs with the highest increase in resignations are filled by the low-wage and frontline workers hit hardest by Covid: hospitality, food service, healthcare, social services, transportation and warehousing.

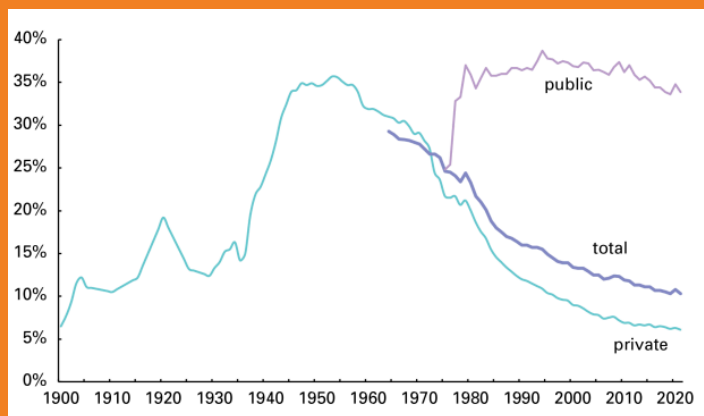
Most of those who quit are not downsizing out of the rat-race to choose the simple life; they are taking advantage of the tight labor market to find new jobs with somewhat less risk of death, marginally better pay and, if they’re lucky, maybe a bit more respect and dignity on the job. Hospitality wages did increase an impressive 12.3 percent in November, and some other low-wage industries saw similar gains, but over-all workers continued to fall behind in 2021.

*The New York Times* reported in January that “[t]he Consumer Price Index rose 6.8 percent in November, a nearly four-decade high; average hourly earnings rose 4.8 percent in November, and other measures likewise show pay gains lagging price increases.” It’s still a

rat race where “winning” is just not falling further behind.

Women workers are absorbing the heaviest blows. Frontline service and care work remains highly gendered, and the pandemic has placed huge new pressures on home-life which mostly fall on working women. One in three women who lost their jobs during the pandemic remain out of work.

Childcare workers were already in short supply due to chronic low-pay, and are now quitting in droves to escape Covid. Even wealthy families are having trouble finding childcare, and the shortage has sent daycare costs skyrocketing out of reach for millions of working-class families. The failure of the Democrats to pass univer-



**Union density.** Doug Henwood summarized: “Union membership fell by almost 2 percent in 2021 as employment rose by over 3 percent. That took union density – the share of the workforce belonging to unions – down from 10.8 percent in 2020 to 10.3 percent last year, where it was in 2019. Density rose in 2020 because more nonunion workers lost their jobs in the Covid crisis than their unionized counterparts, but 2021’s return to employment undid that. For the private sector, just 6.1 percent of workers were unionized last year, down from 6.3 percent in 2020, an all-time low for a series that goes back to 1900.” (LBO News, Jan 23, 2022)

Graphic by Doug Henwood. Sources: official numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics began in 1983; Dough Henwood assembled figures for earlier years from various sources (tinyurl.com/DoughHenwood-LBO).

sal childcare, which virtually every other advanced economy on the planet enjoys, is further feeding this vicious cycle and forcing millions of women back into the home.

### Extreme Inequality

The pandemic has exhausted the working class, but it has also been eye-opening. Support for unions is up to 68 percent, the highest point since 1965, according to Gallup. Labor's popularity is especially impressive when you consider how weak and ineffective unions are today compared to their post-World War 2 high point. Union membership fell again in 2021 to a new low of just 14 million or 10.3 percent of the total workforce, compared to nearly a third of all workers in 1965.

Rising support for unions seems likely driven more by rising rage at the extreme inequalities of our new Gilded Age, and a desire to fight back, than any widespread excitement over the limited gains labor has delivered lately. To explain it in Marxist terms, workers' sense of alienation – the experience of seeing the very wealth we create for our bosses being used to further exploit us – has grown through the pandemic.

*By early 2021, the top one percent held 32 percent of our country's wealth.*

This understanding was heightened by the naked hypocrisy of bosses and politicians talking about “shared sacrifice” while they enriched themselves. Pumped up by public spending, Wall Street soared as “essential workers”

were forced to risk their lives to keep profits flowing.

Since 2020, the wealth of the richest 1 percent rose by \$10 trillion, 15 times more than the gains of the bottom 50 percent of America – and even those gains were mainly the temporary pandemic relief payments. By early 2021, the top 1 percent held 32 percent of our country's wealth while the bottom 50 percent owned just 2 percent of the national pie. This is the most extreme inequality since records began.

Elon Musk's wealth grew from \$25 billion to \$150 billion while Jeff Bezos crested toward \$200 billion on the backs of Amazon's vast low-wage workforce (Amazon warehouses, by the way, now have a turnover rate equal to 100 percent of their entire workforce *every nine months*, underscoring the huge challenges facing



ongoing union drives in Alabama and now Staten Island).

### Labor's Potential

The popularity of unions, and the excitement generated every time workers do rise up in struggle against our corporate overlords, point to the huge potential in this moment. Maybe Robert Reich was premature to declare last October that “American workers are now flexing their muscles for the first time in decades,” but he isn't wrong that millions are looking to fight.

*“For many, the pandemic was the last straw. Workers are fed up, wiped out, done-in, and run down. In the wake of so much hardship, illness and death during the past year, they're not going to take it anymore.”*

To channel this mass anger into effective collective mass action requires organization, leadership, and a fundamentally different strategy on the part of most unions.

*Organized labor, will need to link strikes and mass protests to a concerted political struggle.*

Again Jane McAlevey's December article says things clearest. Both her critique and her strategy for labor outlined here is fully consistent with the arguments we have been hammering away on in Reform & Revolution, and are worth quoting at length:

*“Unfortunately, most national unions squandered 2021 by*

*prioritizing behind-the-scenes jockeying for access to the Biden administration and crumbs from the bosses' table—the kinds of actions easily overturned in a next administration—while the working class watched the president abandon one campaign pledge after another: free community college, cheaper prescription drugs, real relief for students and homeowners in debt, paid medical and family leave, and robust action on climate change that would shift subsidies toward unionized, high-paying jobs for a livable planet. Biden's refusal to do away with the filibuster in 2021 vanquished many desperately needed structural changes—starting with the restoration of the Voting Rights Act and the passage of its workplace companion, the Protecting the Right to Organize, or PRO Act.*

*What should national unions have been doing? Mobilizing members to take the only action—strikes—that could have given them real power in the legislative fights that have ended badly for workers and have most certainly damaged the Democrats' electoral prospects heading into 2022. Biden clearly doesn't have the power to move Congress. Senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema aren't going to change their votes because of personal pleas from the president or the leaders of the Progressive Caucus. What their ilk do respond to is when the corporate elites whose bidding they do phone them and tell them to twitch their votes because profits are being dented by the chaos of too many workers on strike. National legislation that's good for most Americans passes only when workers create untenable crises that make that legislation seem like a far better option than expen-*

*sive strikes, pitchforks, or falling bottom lines.”*

Even among socialists, there is a tendency to think of the labor movement in narrowly economic terms rather than as a primary tool for workers to shape our political future. McAlevey is absolutely right to make those connections, but she stops short of drawing some necessary conclusions.

To secure a decent future, the working class will need to go beyond mass pressure on capitalist politicians and parties. Organized labor, with socialists pushing the envelope, will need to link strikes and mass protests to a concerted political struggle to defeat and replace capitalism's political representatives and to challenge the system as a whole.

For those of us in DSA, this horizon must remain at the heart of all our day-to-day work within our unions and of our debates over socialist strategy for revitalizing labor. From our solidarity rallies with Starbucks baristas to our salting efforts in Amazon, the pandemic has opened a growing space for socialists to get a wide echo for our call to fundamentally re-orient labor – toward mass strikes and protests, toward independence from the Democratic Party, and toward socialism.

*Ty Moore is a member of Tacoma DSA's Steering Committee and the chapters' Campaign Coordinator. Before joining DSA, Ty Moore was a member of Socialist Alternative's Executive Committee for 16 years and National Director for 15 Now, among other organizing projects.*

# Generation Bernie hits Starbucks



INTERVIEW BY PHILIP LOCKER

Philip Locker spoke with a long-time union organizer active in DSA, who asked to be anonymous, about the wave of Starbucks workers fighting to unionize, the challenges they will face, and what role socialists should play in this struggle. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

As we speak, workers in more than 50 Starbucks stores in 19 states have filed for union elections with the NLRB. You've been involved in worker organizing efforts over many years. What do you make of the strategy Starbucks Workers United is using and how does it compare to other efforts?

It's interesting to contrast the Starbucks Workers United approach towards organizing baristas with the Fight For 15 model, because they're really opposites. Fight For 15 organizes fast food workers industry-wide into strikes and mass actions to create a crisis for the fast food companies, but has struggled to institutionalize the movement

into an ongoing shop floor presence.

By contrast, the Starbucks organizing has been far less centralized and has relied on NLRB elections rather than strikes to build momentum. This bottom-up, worker-to-worker organizing has caught fire and spread to hot shops across the country. It recalls an earlier era of organizing where there was less emphasis on identifying strategic targets and running comprehensive campaigns to generate the necessary leverage to compel a first contract out of an employer.

*The task of building a union has only started when you've won an NLRB election.*

We should learn from the Starbucks workers and encourage the optimism that is giving the struggle a sense of momentum, but we shouldn't lose sight of the challenges of building a union at an international corporation like Star-

bucks, where workers are dispersed among 9,000 small stores in the US. It's important to remember that the task of building a union has only started when you've won an NLRB election, and that only about 50 percent of unions that win the election go on to win a first contract.

### What's different this time?

What's really new with the Starbucks campaign is that they're doing it store by store. These are small stores with 15 to 20 workers per store. There are a few reasons this is working so far.

First, Biden's NLRB has come through on something by allowing unionization elections a single shop at a time. This is a very favorable ruling for the workers.

Second, this is Generation Z's Covid moment, where people who are 35 and younger have been working through Covid, and have been through the Bernie experience and the BLM uprisings. They're pretty primed to join a union.

Art on the right page by Ben Gallup

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Ben Gallup is an artist, educator and librarian who lives in Stuttgart, Germany. His first children's book, *Sammy's Attic*, was published in October 2021.



And the third thing is a kind of obfuscation of what building a union is, making it seem easier than it is - you just have to win a majority vote of your co-workers at your store, even though we know that establishing a union is a much tougher fight.

**What kinds of anti-union tactics can we expect from Starbucks?**

The “union avoidance sector” is professional. Workers have to sit through relentless meetings where you’re just made to feel uncomfortable.

And that’s really the more ubiquitous form of union busting. Relentless presentations, lots of one-on-ones to hear your concerns, to make sure that you have the “right facts” about unionization, and

doing that until the workers are just worn out.

And even if the workers win their union election all Starbucks has to legally do is bargain with you in good faith - meet with you and look at your proposal - but they don’t have to give you anything.

*Let’s push for a national bargaining convention where workers draft their demands.*

Even if we win union recognition at 100 Starbucks, if you can channel Starbucks corporate for a moment, what would it mean to negotiate a good contract with those 100 stores? All 9,000 of

your stores are going to unionize and demand that contract. So you have an extreme interest in not reaching a first contract with those first 100 stores. And they have no legal obligation to sign a contract.

**Isn’t the biggest danger that Starbucks endlessly delays, there will be turnover among the workers, and things will sputter out? It seems to me critical that every stage of the unionization effort is building workers’ organization and confidence to take action that can have an economic impact on Starbucks. Building that muscle means organizing rallies, national days of action, pickets, and building towards a strike.**

I think that’s dead right. Workers ultimate leverage is their ability to strike and to organize national actions that disrupt the possibility of business as usual continuing for Starbucks.

One of the downsides of selling workers on the idea that it is easy to form a union is that maybe they’re not prepared for what comes next. To actually win the improvements that you’re looking for won’t come from legal protections of the NLRB process, but from taking escalating actions to the point of being able to shut down a critical number of stores.

**A typical weakness of the labor movement in unionization drives is separating the fight for union recognition from winning a contract as two completely different stages. When the labor movement was most successful in this country in the 1930s the battle for unionization was connected immediately**



**Solidarity protest by Portland Starbucks workers on February 11, after Starbucks fired seven workers in Memphis who filed for union recognition**

**with taking strike action for higher wages and better conditions.**

Since they’ve chosen the NLRB route - to separate union recognition from the battle to get a contract - one of the core assumptions of that strategy within the labor movement is: If you’re going for an NLRB vote, you don’t attack the company. You adopt a kind of a rhetorical framework: “Hey, we want the company to be more successful, and we think we have ideas that would help.”

The argument is that it’s going to be a razor-thin election and if you beat up on the company, you tend to lose the margin you need to win the vote.

In contrast, there’s an approach of comprehensive campaigning for unions. You are fighting for a first contract and recognition all at once, in the same way that the CIO in the thirties did.

The reality was that the CIO was built by a militant minority and it wasn’t built on elections. The sit-down strikers occupied the Flint auto plant at GM and demanded union recognition from the company. So they’re two different strategies. Can we bring these strategies together?

I’m very much from the opposite school of the strategy of focusing on NLRB elections. However, we now have this wave of store filings with the NLRB. That’s exciting and I think you’ve got to ride the wave!

Let’s see when this wave plateaus and then starts to drop, and then there will be a more open discussion about a changing strategy. I think that once a critical mass of Starbucks workers have won an election, it’ll be important to convene some sort of national bargaining convention or some sort of space where workers can determine what their demands are, what sort of actions they’re willing to take to win them, and what their contract campaign will look like.

**What’s the role of socialists in this?**

We can be thought leaders about the big picture questions. What’s our vision on industrial unionism? How do we create class struggle, worker led unions at Starbucks?

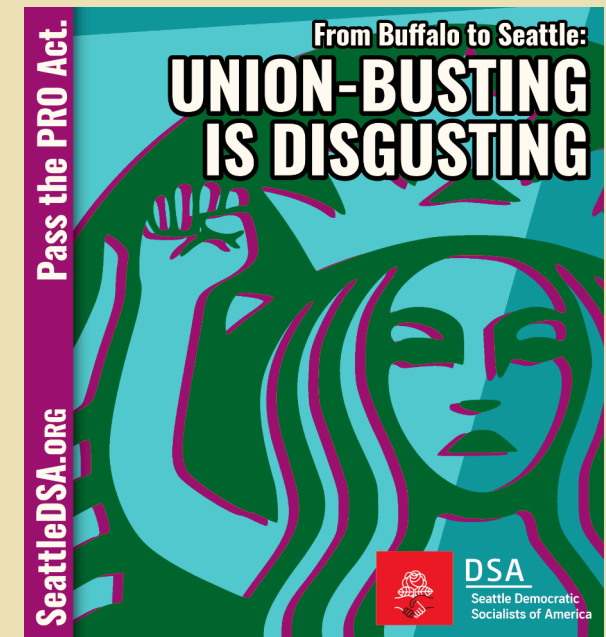
And at the same time, DSA chapters can do a lot of community organizing to fund-raise for the workers and build public pressure on the company to stop their union-busting.

I also think the role of socialists is to be the leaders at the workplace. DSA has members who already are at Starbucks. Some of the key on the ground worker organizers of this effort have been DSA members from the get-go, including in Buffalo.

Obviously, for DSA everything should be seen through the lens of how do we support this campaign and not a sectarian mentality of how to use this for our benefit? What do we do to make sure Starbucks workers succeed in forming a union that wins a good contract? But within that I think that there’s every reason DSA should try to build a socialist current among the workers.

I think one strength of this campaign, and one reason it stands out from a lot of other campaigns, is that there’s a radical and politicized layer of workers driving it forward.

That was one thing that was a real strength in the 1930s and is missing in most unions today. And that’s a strength in this campaign. DSA can help to make this radical core more conscious and more solid by bringing the militant minority of workers together into a socialist organization where they can discuss and work out the key demands and strategy that will be needed to win, and then organize to win Starbucks Workers United to their proposals.





# Return of the Teamsters



BY JESSE DREYER AND NICK MARRAPODE

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**The Teamsters' reform slate that won the leadership can and must act quickly: All eyes are on preparations of the UPS contract negotiations in 2023.**

In November 2021, a reform slate won the national leadership elections of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). Within one of the most powerful unions in the US, with 1.3 million members, a new chapter of democratization and reorientation toward class struggle unionism could be opening.

The reform slate Teamsters United promised to bargain hard against UPS in 2023, organize Amazon, and contribute to rebuilding labor. While some of the reformers came from within the old machine that ran the Teamsters bureaucratically through the practice of business unionism, the change is still a major accomplishment that could serve as a signal to open the floodgates for rank-and-file self-empowerment in the coming struggles.

There's no guarantee this will be the case – but DSA members, activists in the growing socialist movement in the US, can and should help to revive the proud, militant traditions of the self-described “World's Most Powerful Union”.

## Where Things Are

The reform slate, known both as “OZ” for the top ticket officers Sean O'Brien and Fred Zuckerman, and by the official name Teamsters United (TU), won every US region in the 2021 International Brotherhood of Teamsters internal election. It won by a 3 to 1 majority in the South, Central, and Eastern regions, and the Western region with 56 percent and only losing the Canadian region with 25 percent. ([www.oz2021.com/vote-count](http://www.oz2021.com/vote-count)).

This victory was partly a response to brutal setbacks in the 2018 UPS contract, which instituted a two-tier contract for drivers (the most engaged and militant section of the workforce at UPS). So called “22-4 drivers”, named after the provision in that 2018 contract, make up that tier. The wages of the “22-4 drivers” are far lower than regular full-time drivers.

Sean O'Brien, President of Local 25 in Boston and lead negotiator of the package division was fired from that role by James P Hoffa Jr. for a confrontational style of negotiating in 2017. The “Vote No” movement and anger resulting from the sellout 2018 contract built the apparatus of the successful 2021 Teamsters United campaign which was organized in 2018 and spent the following three years campaigning to achieve victory with O'Brien at the top of the ticket.

In 2023 the current UPS contract is up. The TU Slate took aim at the tiers within the contract as a major sticking point for negotiations, as well as strengthening contract language for the part-time workers who make up a significant portion of the UPS workforce. Some 300,000 members work at UPS and the UPS national contract is what other unionized firms often look to as a standard for Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) across industries.

While many activists believe the IBT will authorize a strike on UPS in 2023 through a membership vote, there is no guarantee the trigger will be pulled. It's not likely that the regular bargaining process will eliminate the current tier structure or provide substantial gains for part-timers without a strong commitment to internal organizing. The time for that organizing is now!

Critics of the Teamsters United slate argue the low turnout numbers show the lack of engagement in the union and underlines its decline.

However, this is a double-edged sword. It is a tragic fact that fewer members voted in this election since the start of internal elections in 1991. It is also an opportunity for a new generation of Teamsters to effectively engage with the union and transform its consciousness towards a class struggle orientation unheard of in the go-along get-along business unionism of the past. Moreover, Teamsters locals with the highest victory margins for TU, such as 705 in Chicago, and 804 in New York, among others, did show an increase in overall turnout from the previous election. Moreover, Teamsters locals with the highest victory margins for TU, such as 705 in Chicago, and 804 in New York, among others, did show an increase in overall turnout from the previous election.

*Organizing in good faith with the incoming leadership alongside independent rank-and-file meetings, committees, social media groups and networks is the most viable path.*

The OZ Teamsters United slate has been criticized for being insufficiently dedicated to reform, with only a quarter to a third of the slate coming from the decades-old reformist caucus, Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). However, because TDU activists were some of the most dedicated and crucial members among the rank-and-file driving turnout for the election, and because TDU remains able to mobilize large numbers of rank-and-file leaders, it had a disproportionately important role in platform construction and in the victory of OZ, which suggests it will continue to play a major part in the OZ administration.

More pointed critiques have alleged that TDU itself has abandoned the mantle of militant, member-focused reform in order to be part of the broader O'Brien Zuckerman / Teamsters United coalition. While it remains to be seen what role TDU will take in the organization as a member of the coalition, what cannot be denied is that

before a single vote was cast TDU accomplished two critically necessary reforms which, even had OZ been defeated, would still have put immense power back into the hands of rank-and-file members when it comes time to negotiate contracts.

Mandating rank-and-file workers be on all Teamsters bargaining committees, and eliminating the now infamous Two-Thirds rule were major victories. For these were tools the Hoffa administration used to approve the previous UPS contract that introduced two-tier pay, despite a majority of the membership rejecting that contract.

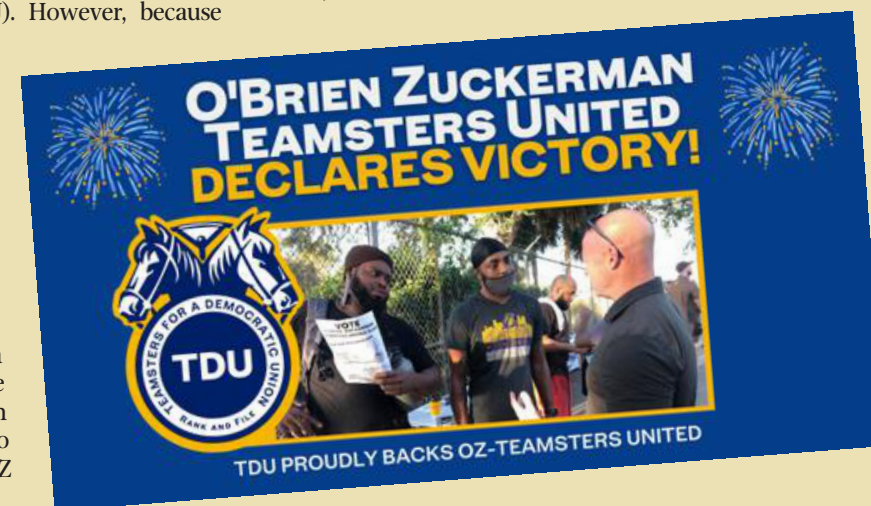
While no grand pronouncements can be made at this stage about the future of TDU, OZ/Teamsters United, or any other tendency within the Teamsters, organizing in good faith with the incoming leadership alongside independent rank-and-file meetings, committees, social media groups and networks to mobilize our brothers and sisters towards a necessary showdown with UPS in 2023 is the most viable path to putting the fight back into our union.

## What Do We Need to Accomplish?

The last time UPS was struck successfully was 1997, when an unprecedented contract campaign fueled by rank-and-file participation led to a 15 day strike. It succeeded in disrupting 5 percent of Gross National Product, winning 10,000 new full-time

positions, a 50 percent increase in pension contributions, and the biggest pay increases in any UPS contracts before or since.

Major contract wins like these, achieved through the self-activity and struggle of workers ourselves, is exactly what we need if we are going to build the militancy of the Teamsters,



and demonstrate to unorganized workers that their best shot at a better life is through a union.

While UPS Teamsters, especially full-timers, are proud of the high pay and look forward to a dignified retirement, in order to secure that income we rely on, it became the norm to work 50+ hour weeks, even for high-seniority “Regular Package Car Drivers” (RPCDs).

The second tier drivers, known colloquially as “22-4’s”, named after the contract provision that describes their lower status, work six day weeks often and maxing out on hours (working the Department of Transportation maximum allowance for commercial drivers) at 60 per week is a standard occurrence. 22-4’s can be forced to work the 6th day and have no ability to “bid” for a route of their own. Worst of all are paid a full \$10 less per hour at the top of their wage progression than regular drivers (RPCDs), despite performing the exact same job, often covering the delivery routes of RPCDs when they take a vacation or sick time.

The issue, however, is beyond contractual terms. Overwork has become ingrained in the culture of many UPS shops, where even top-scale RPCDs accept 10 and more hour days as the norm because of the lucrative overtime pay. It’s analogous to a quote from a striking John Deere UAW worker: “You can make a lot of money if you live there”.

The base salary at 40 hours per week for a top-scale driver is around \$76,000 per year, not counting benefits or pension contributions. Workers rely on their overtime pay to boost their annual earnings to well over \$100k per year. It’s the kind of money that allows UPS drivers long-term financial stability with associated benefits like home-ownership, sending children to college, and even living in single-income households. In order to access that standard of living though, what they give up is the time to enjoy it.

UPS drivers miss out on time with their spouses and children, have less time for leisure activities, and because of the demands of the high volume holiday Peak Season, many have come to dread the holidays. Instead of the season signifying time spent relaxing with family and friends, it has come to represent shivering in a poorly-loaded package car in the dead of night or cramming endless package volume into trucks, trailers, and delivery cars among the chaos of an overloaded UPS hub.

UPSers need a better deal. We must demand a contract that will expand the pay and benefits that have been stagnant in the 25 years since the 1997 strike to the point that overtime pay becomes truly punitive on the company, so workers can have both generous pay AND the time to enjoy it with their families. Asserting those demands, building the internal support necessary for them, and holding our new leadership to the promises that swept them into office will be the work of socialists and labor activists within the IBT and the communities where we live and work.

### How Can the Socialist Movement Pull the Trigger?

The 1997 contract campaign initiated by the administration under former Teamster president Ron Carey relied on mobilizing rank and file Teamsters. It’s a model that we should learn from and in many ways seek to emulate. However, we have a tool in our belt that Ron Carey never had: The emergence of a nationwide socialist movement committed to building working-class power through militant trade unions.

DSA has committed itself at its 2019 and 2021 conventions to wholeheartedly supporting labor struggles and organizing, as an aspiration to once again merge the socialist movement with the labor movement. Though we are still in the early stages of our labor organizing in DSA, we have made some major strides in supporting labor struggles.

Chapters such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York DSA were early leaders in engaging with and encouraging militant organizing, experimenting with building community support during the teachers’ strikes. Since 2020, chapters across the country have learned from those early lessons to develop various methods of using the socialist movement support to assist workers in their struggle against the boss.

For instance, Portland DSA has begun developing a model of socialist labor activism and organizing that could be replicated to build an integrated national network that can help to mobilize the UPS workers who make up one of the most strategic blocs of organized labor in the American economy.

Socialists should agitate for a more militant direct confrontation against the capitalist class, making clear the irreconcilable conflict between worker and boss. Wrenching workplace control away from management is a struggle that every driver and package handler can take up to disrupt global capital.



### The Portland Model of Engaging in Workplace Organizing at UPS

In Portland, labor activists have developed a workplace cadre model other DSA chapters should consider implementing as part of the broader national strategy to reawaken the labor movement in the US. In six months of intense campaigning for the OZ slate and back-breaking labor on the job site, we’ve assembled a team of over a dozen DSA members in workplaces represented by the IBT. We meet regularly and are working on mapping our workplaces, planning to support contract campaigns for smaller shops within the local, building meaningful relationships with union officers, and having regular organizing conversations with rank-and-file workers to begin increasing the average worker’s knowledge and engagement with our union.

We are organizing through the guidance of our Labor Working Group in a body called the Logistics Sub-Committee. With the re-emergence of a broader socialist movement, we can direct members of DSA into UPS and work on building rank and file power on the shop floor in preparation for the 2023 contract negotiations. UPS has a low barrier of entry and with the broad economic trend known as “the great resignation” underway, it is relatively easy to convince workers in DSA to leave dead-end jobs and become employed by “big brown” with the promise of high wages, job security, healthcare, and a role in organizing for what is shaping up to be a historic contract campaign.

UPS is a high-turnover shop, but with early intervention by higher seniority employees we have been able to prepare new recruits for the pre-seniority period by focusing on stress management, physical safety, and a social support system to aid in adjusting to a demanding workplace. It is best to recruit people to UPS either well before or after peak season as there are typically informal layoffs by the company at the end of that season.

# Democratic Socialists Have a Role to Play

BY JESSE DREYER AND NICK MARRAPODE

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Once DSA members have entered the workplace and reached seniority, we need to actively organize projects within the workplace and the local, building relationships among rank-and-filers and with local officers to aid our understanding of the political situation within our union, and build our own competency ahead of the contract campaign. While the IBT election provided us with the perfect opportunity to do all of this—operating in good faith with local leadership that had a stake in a victory for the OZ slate—socialist organizers will need to be creative going forward

Our long term goal is to develop an empowered rank-and-file capable of implementing militant, democratic unionism. The shared projects of reform and aggressive contract negotiation have allowed us to organize openly among our coworkers, make asks of union officers to assess their political priorities and test limits of their solidarity, and gain familiarity with the Teamster bureaucracy all without backlash from our leadership.

Now that the IBT election is over we are orienting toward smaller contract campaigns as dry-runs for UPS in 2023.

Our hope is that getting involved in campaigns at smaller shops will allow us to gain valuable experience on how to execute a contract campaign, and should the workers decide to strike we hope to turn UPSers out to the picket lines in support of our brothers and sisters to gain the invaluable experience of walking the line, something few of our coworkers have ever done.

Additionally, the Portland DSA Labor Working group is earning a reputation among local unions as a capable and valuable ally for workers striking their bosses ever since the stunning success of our campaign to support BCTGM Local 364’s strike at NABISCO-Mondelez.

In an early demonstration of how our groundwork is paying off, members of our cadre, with support from longtime activists of the Labor Working Group, successfully pushed for Teamsters Joint Council 37 to endorse UFCW Local 555's strike of Kroger owned grocery chains just days before they walked out. DSA members on picket lines were able to turn trucks away from the delivery docks and teach striking workers to do the same.

We believe this kind of engagement is invaluable for assessing the organizing needed, helping to build the muscle we will need in 2023.

### Taking the Portland Model Nationwide

The Portland Model involved active recruitment of unemployed and underemployed socialists, cadre building in the Labor Working Group, organizing rank and file workers, assessing local leadership, participating in strike support and other actions helped drive rank and file Teamster engagement. But we need a national network to expand and improve this work

Informal networks have already developed in the years preceding this Portland push but we believe it is best to formalize these networks as part of a broader campaign through the DSA's Democratic Socialist Labor Commission (DSLCL) to help socialists build influence in Teamster locals across the country in preparation for 2023.

While we are optimistic about our chances at helping to build the militancy and capacity of our local ahead of 2023's negotiations, we have benefited immensely from connections

with experienced organizers locally and across the country. Many of those connections are fellow DSA members and lifelong trade union activists, creating an informal network of UPSers and DSA labor organizers from which we have drawn much inspiration. Formalizing that network and building its capacity will be essential for socialists to play a meaningful role in what has the potential to be the largest labor struggle in more than 25 years.

### An Essential Resource for This Project Will Be a Labor Staffer to Help Coordinate the Work of DSA UPSers

In order to form the national structure needed to play a meaningful role in the 2023 contract negotiations and, if successful, follow it up by using the reinvigorated socialist movement rooted in workplaces across the country into the struggle to organize employers like Amazon and FedEx, we will need to hold a conference to prepare to support UPS Teamsters in our contract campaign and potential strike.

A conference could bring forward and debate concrete proposals on what form this work will take, involve existing national bodies such as the DSLCL and National Political Committee (NPC) and solicit support from DSA's national staff. Perhaps most importantly, holding a conference would also serve as an opportunity to promote the project within the organization, drawing labor organizers into supporting the project while educating potential rank and file on how to get hired at UPS, form cadres, survive their pre-seniority period, and begin shop floor organizing with their coworkers. The confer-

ence could also inform members of other unions on the upcoming struggle against UPS. A reinvigorated, fighting Teamsters union would have an impact on many other labor struggles. In our time on picket lines at Nabisco and UFCW, both the power workers feel and the pain on the faces of the bosses when Teamsters honor the picket line was instrumental in helping those workers extract concessions from their employers. BCTGM workers told us every day, "When you go out, we will be there for you on day one."

The process of building that seniority early will strengthen our position as Teamsters if we do walk out and bolster the standing of DSA as a serious and committed partner capable of providing meaningful support.

With the transition to OZ leadership taking place in mid-March, we call for a conference to be held not more than a few weeks afterward, perhaps the first weekend of April. This will give the necessary time to organize it while allowing as much time as possible for the work ahead of us.

If a labor staffer is hired they should be brought up to speed with the work of our comrades organizing within UPS, and dedicate some of their time to working with the newly formed Logistics Subcommittee of the DSLCL. The staffer should help build out an organizational structure within the subcommittee for specific workplaces: UPS, Amazon, FedEx, DHL and other delivery firms. For UPS and DHL both Teamster represented, these structures should be geared towards launching effective contract campaigns to engage the rank and file. Amazon and



FedEx efforts should be focused on recruiting salts for long-term union organizing.

Additionally, we will likely propose that a regular feature of DSA's Democratic Left print and website should contain regular updates on the project's union organizing efforts. Organizing by DSA members in New York and Chicago has already provided inspiring examples of shop floor militancy that are needed in so many workplaces, and having a platform distributed to all DSA members to keep them up to date on what will be a massive class-struggle campaign can help to unify and mobilize the organization.

### Get a Job at UPS, Build the Union, Engage in the Class Struggle with 300,000 Teamsters

Get a job at UPS and engage in the struggle of 300,000 Teamsters, coordinating with dozens of DSA members across the country. Be the eyes and ears in your shop and local, and become a rank-and-file leader. UPS has locations across the country, all of them offering at least \$15 an hour for inside pay, health insurance, and if you decide that this is the role for you then UPS is a place you can have a long term career in a union

shop. This can be a great way to build your DSA chapter's presence in the labor movement and it's an opportunity for YDSA members: UPS offers an "earn while you learn" program which pays \$5,000 per year towards your studies. Get paid to strengthen the labor movement and build a home for socialist politics in a strategic, powerful union.

Our contract expires in July 2023. Join us in organizing a massive grassroots contract campaign. The ideal time to get hired is Spring through Fall of this year. These are entry-level jobs that don't discriminate based on education. Build the union, and maybe even a career.

The journey towards unionizing Amazon will be led through Big Brown. Take the journey with comrades.

*Nick Marrapode is a UPS Delivery Driver, a member of Portland, Oregon DSA, and is active in the Bread and Roses caucus.*

*Jesse Dreyer is an elected leader of Portland DSA. He is a UPS Inside P/T employee and is active in the Reform and Revolution Caucus.*

“Salting” is a union-building tactic in which organizers strategically choose to work for non-unionized workplaces with the intent of helping form a union. Outlined below is a more coordinated and labor-organized approach to this tactic, followed by an article by Mimi Harris which recounts the experience of a network of activists trying to organize from below.

# Salting 101

BY MEL JACKSON

## An Army of Organizers

Not all salt programs are alike. The most important mark of a good salt program is that it offers real organizing training; that it provides the resources, mentorship, and supportive experience to turn activists into real organizers. Unfortunately, this is relatively rare among unions. UNITE HERE, the food service and hospitality union, is one of only a handful that actually offers real training.

Done well, it can be one of the best ways to become a strong labor organizer and learn how to build worker power. Strong salt programs will have a lead organizer to teach and mentor, an organizing team to hold each other accountable, plenty of organizing skills training, and a clear campaign and path to win.

Regular meetings with a lead organizer are a crucial form of mentorship, as is being part of a team that offers support, solidarity, and - crucially - the knowledge that you're not alone. Being supported through challenges and learning from experienced organizers are indispensable to becoming a strong organizer yourself. And a mentor and team are there to give you the extra push to do the things that feel hard, whether that's hanging out with a coworker who's totally different from you, making hard asks, just

picking up the phone, or being persistent about visiting a worker in their home.

Organizing skills training is likewise indispensable. How do you tell your own stories in a powerful way that connects with someone to both agitate and inspire them? How do you have conversations and ask questions that get to the heart of why someone needs change in their life, and pushes them to feel the urgency of that change deeply? And beyond building the skills to move people in powerful one-on-one organizing conversations, what's the strategy to win at work? How can we build unity and worker structure that can withstand everything the boss throws at us? Learning how to identify natural or “organic” leaders in the workplace and create strong worker committees are key components.

But what this training really requires is going through the experience. Ideally, salting through an established program means that you will actually be part of a bottom-up organizing campaign. Recruiting your coworkers to an underground worker committee, strengthening that committee, and going public and winning against the boss - these are invaluable organizing teachers.

The most important thing, however, is not only that you are becoming a strong leader

and organizer. It's that you're learning how to guide and empower your coworkers into becoming strong organizers themselves. They're going through the experience of fighting against the boss and getting trained on how to win, too. This is one thing the labor movement needs: workers who have this experience, knowledge, and confidence, and who can revitalize their unions into democratic, risk-taking, strike-ready, rank-and-file driven ones. We need an army of organizers, and salting is one way to get there.

## Be Strategic

We're not going to be able to salt every workplace, and we don't even need to. The labor movement should be strategic about where salts organize. One strategy is to organize key locations in order to set off organizing waves in certain industries or at certain workplaces, picking a target with the hope of having a domino effect by showing what's possible. Another strategy is to decide to fight in certain ways, like foregoing the difficult terrain of simply filing for an NLRB election in favor of showing power through majority actions (like recognition strikes) to force the boss to voluntarily recognize that you and your coworkers are standing together as a union, which can give inspiration to other organizing workers.

# Salting - Should You Do It?

BY MIMI HARRIS

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## My Experiences with Organizing at Amazon

Salting means taking a job with the specific intent of helping organize that workplace. It's often understood to mean going to a non-unionized workplace and helping form a union.

Sometimes it's done with the support of an established union, other times not. Some unions move workers around to places across the country to

get jobs and try to organize, others recruit students straight out of college, and some socialist and anarchist groups create networks of class-conscious workers to organize in a shared space.

I worked in Amazon warehouses for two and a half years trying to organize in my workplace, and through that, I joined one of these networks. I had successes, failures, and ultimately had to leave. But

would I do it all again? Absolutely.

## Does Salting Mean Hiding Who You Are?

The advice I often got was to hide my leftist views, and that's generally considered best practice: just focus on bread-and-butter issues, and hide any bigger socialist ideas. I think that's a mistake. I felt from the very beginning it was essential that even though I was there with two objectives -

*200 Amazon workers, mostly of East African descent, protested in 2018 outside their workplace in Minnesota against working conditions such as workers being tracked by computer and required to work at a high rate of speed.*

*Photo: Fibonacci Blue, tinyurl.com/AmazonProtestMN, Copyright: CC BY 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en*



first, earning my wages, and second, (hopefully less obvious to the managers), organizing - I was as honest as I could be with my coworkers and got to know them on a genuine basis.

I proceeded with caution as best as I could. I was honest about my background and being college-educated. I alluded to my socialist organizing by telling coworkers that I was a housing activist and active with the Black Lives Matter movement. I even invited some of my coworkers to socialist activities if I thought they would enjoy them. I called my organizing activities my 'other job,' because people sometimes didn't understand why my outside work organizing commitments were hard commitments, but even then I would be honest about what that entailed. I felt like this was really important because I developed genuine friendships with my coworkers where we got together outside of work and they shared their personal lives with me. I wanted to reciprocate that as much as I could.

Sometimes I got scared that it was a problem if people knew that I was a socialist, but I think the most it ever led to was that there were some Trump supporters or believers in capitalism who wanted to talk to the crazy socialist. I think overall that was a good thing and not a bad thing. At the same time, I tried to stick to the nuts and bolts issues facing us in the warehouse, but I didn't shy away from connecting the dots about the issues we face. I feel anything less is, to be honest, condescending.

People liked me at my workplace because I was honest. I don't know if people would

have liked me if I was pretending to be something I'm not, even if I might have "fit in" better. I wasn't a different person, I was just me.

One of the hardest things was finding the line between pointing out the contradictions in our workplace conditions and complaining. I didn't always hit the target. Sometimes, I would have to spend days or weeks repairing my image if I veered too far and was seen as complaining. I feel like once you have class consciousness, some things become easier because people can't gaslight you so much, you understand what's happening, and you even have some ideas about what to do about it.

At the same time, the conditions we all have to work under feel acutely unjust because you're so aware of the exploitative dynamics, and it's almost impossible to feel pride in work when you know that work is being exploited to make billionaires that much richer. So pointing that out to people, even if deep down they know it, can bring out some natural resistance.

### The Working Class is Complicated

We might have some caricatured idea of what kind of person works at an Amazon warehouse, but this capitalist world has a lot of roads that can lead you to the doors of a warehouse looking for work. One of my coworkers, let's call him Luke, was someone who stood out to me in his contradictions. He was around 18, and we were friendly, but he was skeptical of my leftism. I was also skeptical of the beliefs he held, such as the belief that if he worked hard enough someone at the top, maybe even Jeff Bezos, would take

notice. He had heard reports that some of the executives would stop by the warehouse, and he held out hope that he would get noticed and make it to the top. It makes sense why someone would cling to that idea.

Luke once asked me, "Hey, are you a socialist or something?" and I responded, "well, yeah". We couldn't continue the conversation because we were working on the induct belt which goes too fast for conversation, but he's the one who broke the ice of the "s word" for me at the second warehouse I was at.

There's this horrible dynamic of people working against each other because the company makes it a literal competition. Every two hours, they would read out a list of workers from slowest to fastest, so there was a practice of going into other people's lanes to steal each other's 'jiffies' (those soft white Amazon packages) to get your rate up. Luke would help me get through my boxes so I would have time to get my jiffies done so they wouldn't get stolen.

So the same person who thought I was crazy for being a socialist, who wanted so badly to get the approval of management, also went out of his way to help with no benefit to himself.

I felt really bad all the time that I had trouble keeping up my rate. I'm young(ish), healthy, and taller than many other women who were working there. When we had to wrap pallets, I would get so nauseated I thought I would pass out on a daily basis. It made me feel like what's wrong with me, everyone else can do this but I can't. It was actually an impor-



Protest at Amazon 2018 in Minnesota

Photo: Fibonacci Blue, [tinyurl.com/AmazonProtestMN2](https://tinyurl.com/AmazonProtestMN2), Copyright: CC BY 2.0, [creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en)

tant education for me, because others also couldn't do it. They held it together for a couple months, but then would quit. But as a salt, I was committed to it for the long haul. While others quit after a few months, I was there for two and a half years. We have this idea that there are some hardened workers who can deal with these tough conditions, but I don't think there are. People just get worn out and quit or get hurt.

### Just as I was Starting to Have Success...

I salted at three different shifts / warehouses, and not by choice. I got transferred / let go three times and finally lost my job due to Covid. The first time was the most successful in terms of organizing. We had a group of

workers, mostly women who were single mothers and immigrants speaking several different languages between our group, who were getting increasingly organized. When one of our coworkers and her daughter suffered homelessness to flee an abusive spouse, we held a fundraiser and even won the right to use the break room for it.

But then our whole team got broken up. Not in retaliation as far as I can tell, just because that's how Amazon works. Nothing is stable. I was moved to the night shift, but all my coworkers who were single parents had to quit.

The second time was when Amazon over-hired. The third time my shift was consolidated, and I was once again

told to transfer or lose my job. I started on a 4 am shift at a new warehouse where I worked for several months before leaving due to fear of transmitting Covid to my immunocompromised partner, and I was told I was unable to re-apply for a full year.

### What's the Difference Between Salting and a Rank & File Strategy?

The difference is that with salting you pick your industry with strategy in mind, but this whole red baiting of the labor movement as if the major working-class movements of the last century weren't led by workers who were consciously socialist is silly and ahistorical. Picking up a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* doesn't place you suddenly outside of

the working-class. Of course there are socialists that try to LARP (Live Action Role Play) as some caricature of the 'working-class' and come off looking very cringe. And while that's not an effective organizing strategy, unless they have some giant pool of money stashed away that they could live off for the rest of their lives, they're still part of the working-class (just a weird, alienating part of it).

In a certain sense, anyone who sees their workplace as an organizing space is salting. And any socialists that don't see their workplace as an organizing space... well, maybe they should take another look through that *Communist Manifesto*. Think of it this way: if you are looking for a place to work - as one does - it's absolutely worthwhile to add to your considerations where you could have an impact together with others to build toward working class power. If you're going to be a barista anyway, maybe this is the time to choose Starbucks or another cafe where workers are trying to win breakthroughs for their conditions. Maybe read more about the coming UPS battle in 2023 - and join that workforce.

And many times, the job you already have, the job you chose regardless of strategy, is the most effective place you can be organizing. You're probably already rooted there and you hopefully know your coworkers. The only thing left is to be preparing the ground and building practices of comradeship for when workplace issues come up, and helping your coworkers channel their energy to develop a strategy for collective action for change when these crises inevitably occur.

But if you want to salt at Amazon...

My advice to anyone trying to organize at Amazon: Work at a smaller warehouse (we're still talking 500 people). It is so hard to organize, so make it easier on yourself. You don't need to work at the biggest, most strategic warehouse. At this stage of the labor movement where we are just starting to pull ourselves out of the black hole abyss we've been in, we need footholds.

We need to organize where we can, and build up from there. Maybe that is a 20-person Starbucks. And maybe that 20-person Starbucks is less central to the economy than the whole logistics network of Amazon, but it's showing what's possible when workers come together.

Eventually we'll need to not just organize an Amazon warehouse here or there, but we'll need to organize to shut down the economy as part of a political and social revolution. We have to build towards that.

Something I think a lot of DSA members can relate to is that while experiencing losses and treading water is inevitable, wins are important. Even small wins can be a spark that sets off an explosion of organizing.

#### What Kind of Network Do We Need? What Role Can DSA Play?

At the moment, we have a lot of fragmented salting efforts, and that's really inefficient. For years, I was the only salt I knew about in my warehouse. Then, a couple years in, I found out there was someone at the warehouse I used to

work at. We should have been in touch. It sounds so simple, but that could have made a difference in preventing my coworkers from getting laid off.

The established wisdom is that salting should be connected to a big union, but I'm not so sure you need all that. Big unions like SEIU also bring their baggage of top-down organizing, bureaucratic approaches, etc.

The thing you need more than anything is a place where like-minded people are uniting and strategizing around the same goal. There is quite a significant history of leftist organizations (anarchist or socialist) filling in that gap when the stronger and bigger parts of the labor movement are not. DSA can help be a space for those connections, building those spaces for salting networks (both intentional and natural salts), while working with unions that take up the call of organizing new workplaces.

It's not easy to make these connections, especially with work that is so easily targeted by bosses if word gets out about workers' intentions to organize, but I truly believe there are no shortcuts in this regard. The truth is that people are absolutely starving for change, but offered so few options about how to get it. No salt or union activist is going to be the unitary force that changes that, but we can be there when people are ready to struggle, and we can be a well-spring of confidence that if we fight, we can win - not just a better workplace but a better world. In our dark and broken world, that is quite a lot.

## Resurrecting the Rank & File Strategy



BY STEPHAN KIMMERLE

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### The Different Labor Movement Strategies Within DSA – in Theory and Reality

It feels like the start of a rising tide for labor.

Starbucks workers in Buffalo broke the dam. As the magazine goes to print, two Starbucks stores have successfully unionized and 69 more have petitioned the NLRB, accounting for 1,710 workers in total.

John Deere workers fought against the two-tier wage system. They voted down one contract offer after another, voted to strike, and won many more concessions than their union leadership claimed was possible.

Two major unions, the UAW and the Teamsters, won improvements in union democracy and developed a more combative strategy.

However, although “the walk-outs of Striketober were exciting, especially those taking on two-tier wages and stretched-out work hours, overall the labor movement is rickety and on the defensive,” writes Jane Slaughter, former editor of *Labor Notes* and co-author of *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*, on the website of DSA's Bread & Roses caucus, *The Call*.

Members of DSA, one of the largest socialist organizations in US history, have been playing leading roles in recent labor struggles, including the educators' “red state revolt,” an uprising of strikes in 2018 led by rank-and-file educators in Republican-dominated states. John Logan, a labor studies professor at San Francisco State University, made a similar point: “If you think about the kinds of employees [Starbucks has], the stereotype of people that work there seems to be true – a lot of young people, Bernie supporters, DSA types.”

DSA is making a difference.

That's why it's crucial that we in DSA discuss the best labor strategy. Political caucuses or trends within DSA have advocated for different strategies – which we evaluate below.

#### SMC's Case-by-Case Approach

The Socialist Majority Caucus (SMC) emphasizes developing friendly relations with unions. They approach the need to reform unions and form reform caucuses on a case-by-case basis. They don't see a structural need for a Rank & File Strategy.

For example, Russell Weiss-Irwin, a co-author of the labor resolution adopted at the 2021

DSA convention, promoted this resolution on the SMC website, saying: “There certainly can be an uncomfortable tension between a desire to change unions and challenge existing leadership, and to partner with unions to win strikes and organize new workers! This resolution recognizes that and suggests that local chapters and labor groups, as well as national networks of comrades in certain industries or unions are best positioned to find the right balance case-by-case when facing that dilemma.”

We don't think we can solve the structural, recurring problem of business unionism on merely a “case-by-case” basis.

#### CPN: Build Unions First, Politics Second

Ryan Mosgrove, one of the leaders of CPN before moving on to the Renewal slate in 2021 criticized the Rank & File Strategy (described below) adopted by the 2019 DSA convention for assuming “[f]irst, that all labor leadership are by their nature ‘conservative’ and antagonistic to the interests of the workers they represent regardless of, whether they actually are or not. Second, that socialists represent the *real* leadership of workers, again regardless of whether

# Labor's Ugly Side

*"I am not blind to the shortcomings of our own people. I am not unaware that leaders betray, and sell out, and play false. But this knowledge does not outweigh the fact that my class, the working class, is exploited, driven, fought back with the weapon of starvation, with guns and with venal courts whenever they strike for conditions more human, more civilized for their children, and for their children's children."*

Mother Jones, labor organizer, 1837 - 1930

There is clearly a new interest in organizing unions. A September 2021 Gallup poll found that "68 percent of Americans approve of labor unions," the highest since 1965.

However, after decades of setbacks, anti-union propaganda can still find an echo. Labor is not in good shape.

The vast majority of labor leaders are entrenched in **business unionism** – the belief that we have to cooperate with the bosses to make sure the corporations we work for compete well in the market, as if the workers have as much stake in the company's success as the capitalists. Business unionism also tells us we must support our country in global market competition, pitting us against foreign workers rather than developing international solidarity with them. Furthermore, business unionism

views the role of unions as providing services for their members, handling grievances, administering health-care and pension funds, and providing consumer benefits for members. This is in sharp contrast to a socialist conception of unions as bodies for organizing the working-class struggle against the bosses.

## Rebuilding labor in currently organized and unorganized workplaces depends on criticism of the status quo.

Often, business unionism goes hand in hand with the self-enrichment of labor leaders. The corruption scandals of the UAW are just the tip of the iceberg (two of UAW's former presidents reported to prison in 2021). It's clear that the corruption of labor bureaucrats is extremely damaging to our movement.

The ideas of business unions which dominate the unions – as well as the lack of a strong labor movement – have heavily influenced the consciousness of all working-class people.

What the working class faces is a triple crisis of leadership, organization, and consciousness. The number of organized workers and the state of the unions (in terms of democ-

racy, effective management, etc.) have both reached a historic low point. Working-class people, including many union members, suffer from a lack of self confidence, have low expectations, and little awareness of our collective power. This is exacerbated by the vast majority of union leaders, who are wedded to the capitalist social order which has entrenched a culture of unions collaborating with management, serving as loyal foot soldiers for the Democratic Party, begging for crumbs before elections, and leaving empty-handed.

The triple crisis cannot be solved by focusing on just one aspect in isolation. No new leadership will arise without fundamental changes in workers' consciousness, which develops through struggle and organizing. However, a bold leadership can be of tremendous help in turning the situation around, helping workers gain experience and confidence through struggles.

Rebuilding labor in organized and unorganized workplaces requires a clear rejection of the status quo and an entirely new vision – unions based on democracy and anti-capitalist class struggle. For example, if we want to convince workers in car factories in the South to unionize, we need to present a completely different model than the UAW's model in the North, which has failed for decades.

they even have members in that union or not, by their nature as *socialists*."

He's right that not *all* union leaders are conservative. However, his argument lacks a structural critique of the union bureaucracy and how to fight it. He ends up with a pragmatic, ad hoc criticism of conservative union leaders – this or that union leader might sell out; others might not. He covers up the overwhelming dominance of pro-capitalist politics and business unionism among most union leaders with alleged modesty: Who are we – a small, newly-emerging socialist organization – to criticize unions (or their leaders) from the outside?

CPN downplayed the role of the business-unionist ideas: "We cannot cling to the notion that if more unions simply had better politics, our power would grow," wrote Ryan Kekeris on CPN's website (August 14, 2020). "We must reject the tendency to assume that the primary causes of our weakened labor movement are grounded in ideology."

CPN also downplayed the role of the union bureaucracy and denounced the Rank & File Strategy as "seek[ing] to create a militant minority that can be a vanguard for the rest of the workers in a given union or union local." To try to replicate the victories of reform caucuses like CORE in the Chicago Teachers Union "misreads local conditions," wrote CPN (May 7, 2020).

CPN's approach does not arm workers and DSA with an understanding of where business unionism comes from, or how to fight it.

### Libertarian Socialists: Dual Power

Many anarchists and libertarian socialists in DSA want to build "dual power." They believe that we must focus on carving out a space for economic power and autonomy *within* this capitalist society (or adjacent to it) until a different economic system takes its place. They support unions as an organizing tool for workers; however, they often think that unions fighting for reforms (higher wages, better working conditions) should focus instead on building cooperatives in which workers themselves run the shop.

"Democratic labor unions can seize the workplace; worker-owned cooperatives can build it anew in democratic form," writes the Libertarian Socialist Caucus (LSC, December 31, 2018) in a caucus statement. Unions are described positively as counter-institutions. However: "Our goal in

building up this infrastructure is to create **counter-power**."

Anarchists view workers' co-ops as power independent of capitalism, a second, coexisting power, a "dual power" alongside the forces of capital. Since unions don't seek to create and maintain a situation of dual power, most libertarian socialists maintain that unions represent reform, and workers' cooperatives represent revolution.

Still, co-ops have to survive within the framework of a competitive market system, and are not at all above or outside of capitalist power. Structurally, the workers as their own managers have to exercise wage restraint to be able to compete, as long as competition prevails in their specific industry. They then depend on the framework set by the financial institutions and large corporations (e.g., interest rates and conditions, machinery, computer and software production).

The LSC statement agrees with this danger and writes, "we must not emulate the traditional capitalist firm." But how would they propose to avoid this?

In our view (but not the LSC's view) this brings us to the battle for state power – and the need for powerful unions. Co-ops can point in the direction of workers' control and management. But to break the framework of capitalist competition, its drive toward environmental devastation and to stop the race to the bottom, we need the power of a state to regulate industries and protect such worker-run factories from the destructive force of markets. This is why we need a political struggle to break the power of the capitalist market by taking the big corporations into public ownership as part of a democratic socialist planned economy, along with the working class taking state power – not autonomous, small-scale worker co-ops.

### Rank & File Strategy

The **Rank & File Strategy** is promoted by DSA's Bread & Roses (B&R) caucus, the Tempest Collective, and the most influential network of left and rank-and-file workers, *Labor Notes*, although each of these groups approach the Rank & File Strategy differently. The term was explained in a working paper that Kim Moody wrote in 2000 for his organization Solidarity called "The Rank and File Strategy: Building A Socialist Movement in the US." Kim Moody argues:

*The gap between the socialist organizations and the active sections of the working class who are*

## The PRO Act, Labor, and the Democrats

The PRO Act was a law proposed in early 2021 that would have made it much easier to unionize workplaces. If passed, it would have done away with the anti-union “right to work” laws that exist in 28 states and banned many of the union-busting tactics used by employers. DSA played a very positive role, organizing phone-banks of nearly a million calls. At least two senators (including Joe Manchin!) who didn’t initially back the bill were flipped, and they pledged support. In the end, though, the bill was killed by Congress. It wasn’t just the filibuster; some Democrats helped kill it too.

This is not the exception, but the rule when it comes to how Democrats deal with workers’ rights. Still, most union leaders use their authority to provide cover for the corporate Democrats. One of the most appalling examples was when the AFL-CIO itself publicly argued to abandon the leverage-boosting tactic of linking the “Build Back Better” bill to the bipartisan infrastructure bill. When the progressives (all except the six Squad members) surrendered, labor’s official voice helped the Democrats cover up this capitulation.

*the organizers of much of the resistance to the employers and rebellions within the unions is too great ... The Rank & File Strategy attempts to bridge that gap. We call this the Rank & File Strategy because it is based on the very real growth of rank-and-file activity and rebellion that occurs in periods of intensified class struggle.*

The task for socialists, Moody writes, “is not simply to offer an alternative ideology, a total explanation of the world, but to draw out the class consciousness that makes such bigger ideas realistic. The notion of a **transitional** set of ideas is key to this strategy.”

Moody emphasizes the importance of unions, without any false romanticism. “Unions, of course, are far from perfect political organizations. They are bureaucratic. They often embody or protect racist and/or sexist practices. Their official ideology, which we will call business unionism, is a mass of contradictions, including the idea of labor-management partnerships. Their leaders generally do their best to straddle class conflict.”

The Rank & File Strategy includes challenging those leaders in an organized form: “Transitional organizations include rank-and-file reform movements and caucuses rooted in the workplace and the unions.”

This is the strength of the Rank & File Strategy. A conscious approach to rebuilding the labor movement inevitably requires a struggle against the trend of business unionism, which is enforced by the labor bureaucracy.

Business unionism – the cozy relationship between union leaders, the capitalists, and the Democratic Party – goes hand-in-hand with a bureaucratic regime within working-class organizations that must pressure workers to accept the demands of the capitalists.

The struggle for democracy is one essential part of the liberation of workers in the unions. The other key part is the battle for a class-struggle approach.

Successes like the strikes of the Chicago Teachers Union would not have been possible without the organized effort of the Caucus Of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE). The changes within the Teamsters are at least to a significant degree the result of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). In the UAW, Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) is trying to bring people together to reform the union and was involved in recent changes.

There are many more examples that underline this point – organizing is power. This is true both in the struggle of a union against the boss and in the intra-union struggle of activists who oppose business unionism against the bureaucrats who defend it.

Jeremy Gong from B&R writes, “Socialists must aim to change the calculus of even the most conservative labor bureaucrats. We can do this by growing the class struggle and building independent politics and socialist organization” (“The Rank & File Strategy is Political,” *The Call*, February 1, 2022). This is a good starting point. However, Jeremy Gong fails to spell out the most essential and the most political element of the Rank & File Strategy – the need to organize rank-and-file caucuses to take on the labor bureaucracy, along with their entire business-unionist philosophy that has devastated the labor movement.

Jeremy also refers in his article to Lenin’s argument in *What Is To Be Done?* about the limitations of what Lenin describes as “trade unionist consciousness” – namely that workers, if left to their own devices and not guided by outside intellectuals, only develop a kind of reformist consciousness under capitalism rather than socialist consciousness.

Hal Draper argues very well that Lenin himself later reversed this position, acknowledging that it was inaccurate (see “The Myth of Lenin’s ‘Concept of The Party’”). Unfortunately few socialists are aware of Lenin’s reversal on this key point.

Lenin’s 1902 argument seems to lead Jeremy Gong (like many others) into a schematic understanding of the role of trade unions in contrast with the role of a socialist party or movement. There are important differences between a party and a broad trade union, but the question of the need for socialist ideas within unions is, in our view, essential to emphasize.

### The Disappointing Realities of the Rank & File Strategy in DSA

With a narrow majority, DSA adopted the Rank & File Strategy at its national convention in 2019. The 2019 debate was relatively heated. B&R won this battle, but presented the Rank & File Strategy as mainly about finding “organic leaders” at workplaces (see [tinyurl.com/bnr2019labor](https://tinyurl.com/bnr2019labor)). B&R was opposed in 2019 by CPN. (You can find the 2019 labor resolutions, #3 by CPN, #32 by B&R, here: [tinyurl.com/dsa2019resolutions](https://tinyurl.com/dsa2019resolutions)).

These issues were not debated as much at the 2021 convention. A worked-out compromise about DSA’s labor strategy was presented to the convention, and it passed without much controversy (except for one amendment).

Mel Bienenfeld of the *Tempest* (“What’s Become of the Rank & File Strategy?” December 19, 2021) traced these discussions:

*After the 2021 Convention, what can we say about the general consciousness within DSA regarding the [Rank & File*



Rosa Luxemburg wrote in 1906 about the “dialectic of developments” that brings together with the strength of organizing an “trade-union officialdom” with a “restricted horizon”, a “bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook”.

*Strategy]? This brings us back to [the labor resolution of the DSA national convention], itself a compromise between the pro- and anti-RFS factions. Does the language of supporting the ‘organized efforts of Rank-and-File workers...to transform their unions into militant and democratic vehicles’ and ‘tying workplace demands to whole community demands and campaigns and building possibilities for experiential solidarity’ indicate a clear commitment to the RFS, at least among significant sections of DSA, in anything like the form Moody intended it? I doubt it. The resolution was not discussed in any public forum within DSA—there were no pre-convention meetings, for example—and once it became part of the ‘consent agenda,’ that precluded discussion at the convention itself.*

Andy Sernatinger, in his article (*Tempest*, January 13, 2022) argues that even the “2019 Convention debate never addressed the central question, the relationship to the labor bureaucracy,” but focused on an abstract debate about whether to focus on already unionized

workplaces (emphasized by B&R) or on organizing the unorganized at non-union workplaces (advocated by CPN). Andy Sernatinger describes a shift even further away from the Rank & File Strategy:

*Every political shift has a corresponding intellectual shift. Bienenfeld doesn’t address the celebrity status of SEIU-staff-organizer-turned-author Jane McAlevey in DSA, but her ideas are important to consider. In mid-2019, DSA began a partnership with McAlevey, offering free copies of her book, No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age and organizing webinars (still on the front page of DSA’s website). This matters in understanding the fate of the RFS because McAlevey’s politics served as an addition and then replacement perspective for DSAers.*

*On its surface, there’s no direct conflict between the common understanding of RFS within DSA and McAlevey’s politics – she frames her task as union organizing in today’s context, takes up ‘power structures’ among workers and capital, and tries to establish her legiti-*



Often terms like “union bureaucracy” lead to an understanding that somehow the apparatus, the full-time organizers, the leadership of unions is inevitably corrupted, and it’s better for socialists to steer clear of these positions.

When we use the term “labor bureaucracy” in a Marxist sense, we are not referring to the sociological group of union staffers, but rather to the political force that militant union activists are confronted with – a pro-capitalist political trend within labor, rooted in powerful positions in our labor organizations.

The reality is that the people who make up the union apparatus, the people who live not just for the labor movement but directly from it (receive their wages from unions), often become a conservative obstacle to struggle. From their viewpoint, the organization “has gradually been changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggle should be subordinated,” Rosa Luxemburg argued in 1906. She was the first to identify this “dialectic of developments” that powerful workers’ organizations ironically create a “trade-union officialdom” with a “restricted horizon,” a “bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook.”

Rosa Luxemburg continues: “In close connection with these theoretical tendencies [of opportunism] is a revolution in the relations of leaders and rank-and-file. In place of the direction [of the union] by co-workers through local committees with their admitted inadequacy, there appears the business-like direction of the trade-union

officials” (all quotes from *The Mass Strike: The Political Party and The Trade Unions*, 1906).

One factor is that the union bureaucracy relies on the labor movement for its livelihood. So if unions were wiped out by the capitalists, the union bureaucrats would lose their careers, salaries, and power. At the same time, the labor bureaucracy also relies on a peaceful coexistence with capitalism. Their business

## The Labor Bureaucracy

Is every union staffer a bureaucrat?  
What is the labor bureaucracy exactly?

unionism ideology – which strives to bring workers and capitalists together to work out their disagreements – is an expression of their contradictory position.

However, the problem is bigger than simply the question of staffers. Even rank-and-file union leaders on the shop-floor experience pressure from the bosses. Often the “carrots” – the concessions management offers the union – have a bigger impact than the “sticks” of union busting and repression. It would be mistaken to think the pro-capitalist bureaucracy is an isolated evil and that rank-and-file workers are inherently good. In fact, a key function of the union bureaucracy is precisely to act as the instrument by which the pressures of capital are transmitted onto the workers’ movement at large.

Workers can’t free themselves without getting organized to fight for their interests.

However, even the most dedicated, well-meaning organizers develop some conservatism, some inertia, some fears of losing this or that position or elected office. “Each party, even the most revolutionary party, must inevitably produce its own organizational conservatism,” writes Trotsky in *Lessons of October* about the experience of debates within the Bolshevik Party.

In unions, socialist, and social-democratic parties all around the world, these trends developed over time and eventually crystallized into an organized force. Initial waverings and sell-outs gradually grew into an organized bureaucracy. Labor leaders and parliamentary groups were at the center of this development.

Capitalism would have been overthrown long ago had it relied on only a small minority defending its rights to exploit and oppress, or if it relied just on the military might of armies and police. Instead, the class struggle is brought into our own organizations – unions, parties, community organizations – in the form of the battles within our ranks about effective policies and ideas. The bureaucracy is a network of people – including significant, powerful staff in our unions – who strategize and work hard to maintain business unionism as the dominant ideology and practice.

On the other side, workers who fight for leadership positions, staffers who carry out a fighting, class-struggle policy and are held accountable by workers are a part of the struggle against business unionism. So no, not every staffer is a bureaucrat.



Detroit Institute of Art ~ Diego Rivera Mural

Photo: VasenkaPhotography, flickr.com/photos/vasenka/6773420781, Copyright: CC BY 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/

*macy by drawing on the legacy of militant CIO organizers in the 1930s. This is appealing to young DSA members who are historically disconnected from the labor movement; McAlevey is a capable writer who can give entry into concepts from organized labor and rule over a void.*

*McAlevey speaks to the core anxieties of the DSA milieu: her writings center on organizing unorganized workers with a comprehensive model, all while delivering a sense of legitimacy to DSA labor efforts that might otherwise be an outsider affair... Since the central questions of business unionism and the labor bureaucracy were avoided in the DSA discussion of the RFS, the RFS was cut off from much of its central explanatory power and was routed by the professional organizer logic expressed by McAlevey.*

We suspect Andy Sernatinger would agree with us that there is a lot of strength in many of the tactics promoted by Jane McAlevey. However, they need to be combined with the fundamental wisdom of the Rank & File Strategy – the need to organize for a class-struggle approach and a vibrant democracy within the labor movement, against the resistance of the bureaucracy.

## A Socialist Rank & File Strategy

DSA and its Democratic Socialist Labor Commission, as well as individual members, can play very valuable roles in rebuilding the labor movement and building rank-and-file caucuses within unions. From DSA solidarity work for strikers, to the role of DSA members in the teachers’ “red state revolt,” to the role of socialists in organizing Starbucks – DSA is playing a valuable role.

However, we need to revive the Rank & File Strategy.

The first part that needs to be revived is an understanding that we need to build an organized opposition to the dominant trend within labor – business unionism.

The second part is that socialists have something unique to contribute to labor.

When the Rank & File Strategy is mentioned in DSA, the question of the battle of ideas within labor is, in our view, underrepresented. We quoted Kim Moody above arguing that the Rank & File Strategy “is not simply to offer an alternative ideology.” Not simply, yes, but, in our view, it’s still a key part.

Even the best union activists will be blackmailed if they accept the logic of capitalist competition and production for profit. When an employer claims that a decline in the company’s income means that layoffs or wage cuts are necessary, socialist ideas give workers the confidence to fight back and win. Socialist ideas empower workers not to give in to the bosses’ demands. Socialist ideas help workers question why an unelected boss gets to control their life.

Socialists have to be part of workers’ struggles and try to be the best organizers while also striving to unite all workers regardless of their political views. At the same time, who will offer the ideas necessary to fight beyond the narrow limits of capitalism, if not us?

*Stephan Kimmerle is a Seattle DSA activist and a co-convenor of its District 2 group. He has been involved in the labor and socialist movement internationally – from being a shop steward and works council member in the public sector in Germany to organizing Marxists on an international level. He is working part-time jobs while being a stay-at-home dad of two wonderful children.*

# A Practical Guide to Strike Solidarity



BY LAURA WADLIN

TWITTER @EXPLAURATORY

After the 40-day strike against Nabisco ([tinyurl.com/CallNabisco](https://www.tinyurl.com/CallNabisco)) this past summer, strike leaders from BCTGM Local 364 repeatedly said that the involvement of Portland DSA was critical to the strike and was the catalyst for a militant awakening among many Nabisco workers. Building a strong reputation for DSA in the labor movement gets us closer to collapsing the

gap between the socialist movement and the rest of the working class.

Through our efforts we discovered tactics and best practices to be used in future solidarity campaigns. Although not all of this advice will perfectly fit every situation, this is what we learned:

Art by Meg Morigan



## 1. Come often, bring energy, make relationships

Go to the picket line. Go to the picket line. Go to the picket line.

Bring food and drink (maybe fruit, not just donuts!). Introduce yourself to the picket captain or crew and follow their directions. Talk to lots of strikers and say you are a member of DSA. Take note of elected union leaders like shop stewards as well as informal leaders that workers respect. Ask them why they went on strike, what it's like to work there, how long they've been there, how they're feeling about the strike, and what the union members need. Listen and remember their names and what specifically they are fighting for. Empathize and sympathize, even if you hear sentiments you have mixed feelings about.

If you are a union member, say that, and mention an ongoing struggle in your workplace. Tell them why their strike is important to you and why DSA wants to support them. Praise them for taking this bold step and showing the rest of us how to fight back against the corporations and the billionaires. Tell them you hope they will come out to support you when you go on strike – establishing that solidarity is a two-way street, not charity.

Show them you are happy to be there. Cheer at honking cars, dance to the music, wave signs with spirit. Share good news and scuttlebutt. Tell workers you'll be back again, and then come back again.

When you have established a rapport, ask people for their social media handles or phone numbers to connect with them after the action. Follow up:



Portland DSA in solidarity with workers on strike at Nabisco

chat about the strike and send them pictures you took. Invite them to a DSA meeting to share their experience about being on strike.

## 2. Organize support actions

Solidarity actions from the community can energize strikers, connect DSA more deeply with the labor movement, and make company operations more uncomfortable. Whatever activities you engage in, communicate consistently with the strikers about their needs and how you can be most helpful. Don't be afraid to make suggestions, as union members may not have much of a pre-existing idea of what community support could look like.

### Community Rallies

Once you have established a relationship with people on

the line, ask if there will be any rallies for community support. If yes, mobilize DSA members and allied union members to the rally. Ask who is planning it and how to get in touch with them to help out (it might be Jobs with Justice or a regional union council). Ask to have a DSA speaker.

If no community solidarity event has been planned, offer to organize one. Communicate closely and directly with the contacts you've made on the line. Ask them when would be a good time and place to hold the rally. Ask them which of their union members should speak at the rally, or directly invite your contacts to speak. Invite other union rank-and-filers to speak on behalf of their local. Wear DSA shirts and union swag.

## Picket Line Shifts

Mobilize people to walk the picket line during a given time frame, maybe around 2-4 hours. This can be especially helpful if union members tell you there's a particular time of day or a particular location where they need bodies on the line. Treat it like a rally without the central focus of speakers. If you have multiple shifts or multiple locations to fill, assign DSA "picket captains" who are responsible for coordinating the supporters at their shift.

## Direct Actions and Disruptions

Consider ways to pose an objection to company operations during the strike – by directly protesting strike-breaking labor (scabs), supply delivery, or other interactions that are essential to production. Whenever possible, make

your action visible to the strikers, as witnessing the bravery of strangers on their behalf can give workers an enormous morale boost.

DSA visibility can also protect strikers from legal action; community members exercising their First Amendment rights are less restricted than union members trying to abide by oppressive labor laws. Keep this in mind when publicizing events: bosses are more than willing to get aggressive in filing lawsuits to try to impede strikes and solidarity work, so don't give them easy ammunition by implying you're doing anything other than engaging in free speech protests.

## Get Creative with Your Tactics. Here are Some Ideas:

Protest scabs and delivery workers as they enter and exit

the facility, such as with a large group of people who stand in front of entrances/exits. Yell and chant until they go away, or at least make it more difficult and uncomfortable for them to continue with normal operations.

Sometimes the main object of a strike is to create a public crisis that poisons the company brand or compels political decision-makers to act. To accomplish this, all kinds of attention-grabbing actions can work: marches, car or bicycle caravans, street blockades, sit-ins, loud and visible disruptions of services inside or outside the worksite, dramatic props like giant puppets or postcards, mock ceremonies, vigils, takeovers of meetings, town halls, calling into talk shows, letters to the editor, or occupying key locations for the employer, such as a school, company headquarters, a retail location, or even in front of a manager's home. Use intel from workers to determine the best target.

Take care before each action to make sure all involved know their legal rights and risks, and commit to a level of risk that you are comfortable with. Do not attempt risky actions alone.

Get group unity on what your plan is in the case that police arrive or security initiates a physical confrontation. Designate someone to take pictures and video during the action. Send photos and accounts of these actions to the local press.

Take it seriously if strikers are concerned about escalating actions too much, and don't put your relationships with them in jeopardy. Keep in mind that staffers and higher elected leadership may take a more conservative approach



than rank-and-file members. If a conflict arises, prioritize honoring the wishes of the workers. That may mean either following instructions that disappoint you or risking a political conflict with staffers and leadership.

## 3. Use and build the organizational power of DSA

Strike solidarity campaigns are an opportunity to use the organization we have and to find new ways of growing it. Ask yourself these questions:

What infrastructure – digital, physical, and organizational – does your chapter need to make strike support possible?

Can you contact union members in your chapter and ask them to get their local to support the strike? National DSA can provide you with a list!

What nearby chapters can you mobilize for turnout in addition to your own?

Can your chapter donate directly to the union's strike fund? Can you contact other chapters or local unions in the area and ask them to do the same?

What forums can you use to educate DSA members and others about the workers' struggle and the history of their union and industry? Can you invite strikers to speak at a political education event or give an update at a General Meeting?

## Ask Strikers to Join DSA

Class warriors need organization, and the socialist movement needs class warriors. There are practically no better recruits for DSA than working people who have firsthand experience organizing their coworkers and seeing what it takes to stand up to employers and the ruling class. Wait to ask workers to join DSA once you've built relationships and shown them the kind of work DSA does. Then it's only natural to encourage them to be part of that class-wide solidarity work and our political project to build working class power for the long term.

*Laura Wadlin is co-chair of Portland DSA and a member of the Bread & Roses Caucus.*

# Stuck At An Impasse



PHILIP LOCKER

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## DSA Needs to Prioritize Movement Building, Not Trailing the Democrats.

2021 was a year of malaise for DSA and the Left. The widespread exhaustion and burnout after two years of Covid was certainly a factor, but it does not explain why during this same pandemic there was an unprecedented wave of BLM protests in the US and huge movements in some other countries. The movement for Black Lives in the summer of 2020 was followed by an ebb in social movements and an offensive by the right on issues of crime and policing in 2021. Initial hopes in Biden have turned into bitter disappointment and a sense of helplessness in the face of opposition from right-wing Democrats in the Senate represented by Manchin and Sinema.

After a surge of growth in 2020, DSA has stagnated at just under 95,000 members. Active participation in chapters and campaigns has generally fallen. Faced with a sharp change in the political terrain, DSA and the wider Left has struggled to gain its bearings and arrive at a new strategic orientation fit for this new period.

From 2016 to 2020 DSA was able to grow exponentially in a

political situation marked by two main axes, one pro-Bernie and the other anti-Trump. DSA brought together the most radical wing of supporters of Bernie Sanders and a new generation of young people politicized by Trump, BLM, environmental activism, and a new wave of feminism. DSA stood out for its bold socialist profile, activism, and offer of a democratic membership organization. It's most successful tactic was electing socialist candidates on the Democratic ballot line (such as AOC, Rashida Tlaib, and Julia Salazar).

While these candidates were described by the media as socialists, the reality was more complicated. Most of them did not call themselves socialist in their public facing material or offer a clear socialist program, but they did run boldly against the Democratic establishment and championed a series of radical reforms (Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, Tuition Free Higher Education, Abolish ICE, Tax the Rich, etc).

While a majority of DSA activists hoped that this was part of a "dirty break" strategy to build towards a workers party, in practice these candidates have generally not used their campaigns or public offices to promote the idea of a

workers party or a party surrogate like DSA. However these weaknesses were less visible while Trump was in power and DSA was rapidly growing.

## Reorientation Under the Biden Administration

New questions are posed for the Left with Biden's election. Unfortunately, the August 2021 DSA National Convention was a missed opportunity to have a thorough political discussion of these issues.

This reflects the pragmatic ideology dominant in DSA. In this context, "pragmatism" doesn't mean being "practical" or "realistic" as it is commonly understood, but instead refers to a distinct philosophy which is highly influential in the US. Rather than developing strategy based on principles and theory, pragmatists' primary concern is "will it work?" Another key tenant of this philosophy is that knowledge comes from following the facts and experience. Pragmatism in the US labor movement and on the Left is often expressed as hostility to theoretical and political debate, instead favoring practical and organizational questions (i.e. #DoTheWork).

In contrast, Marxism argues that human experience is shaped by underlying ideolog-

# A New Strategy is Needed for DSA

DSA has been stuck in a strategic impasse since Biden entered the White House. We believe that DSA needs a new strategy to meet the new challenges facing the Left under Biden. In our view, the most pressing tasks are:

## 1) Prioritize Movement Building

With political terrain blocked for now, working people and activists are increasingly likely to turn to social struggle. In 2022 DSA should prioritize:

- ✊ **Unionizing Starbucks**, strike solidarity, and preparations for the 2023 UPS contract. These are key ways to build working class power and grow DSA as an organized force in the labor movement.
- ✊ Campaigning for Biden to **cancel student debt**.
- ✊ Building a **socialist feminist movement** which helps organize nationwide protests to defend abortion rights.
- ✊ **Climate Justice**. The 2021 DSA convention gave a mandate to the National Political Committee to prioritize building a national Green New Deal campaign, but so far not much has happened.

## 2) Reboot DSA's Electoral Strategy

Electoral work has dominated too much of DSA's activity without being linked to building DSA and to promoting a distinctly socialist message and a class struggle approach. Electoral work is a valuable tactic, but it is secondary to building mass movements, workers' organizations, and raising consciousness. We need to run candidates who use their campaigns to promote DSA and social movements.

DSA candidates need to sharply delineate themselves from Biden and the Democratic

establishment, running as a clear cut left-wing alternative to the status quo of Democratic rule. This requires a sharp oppositional stance towards the Democratic leadership and points towards a dirty break from the Democratic Party. This is the starting point of any serious strategy to actively build DSA as a working class party that can prepare the way for a break with the pro-capitalist Democrats.

Rather than tamping down working class discontent under Biden, (telling workers "don't worry, inflation is temporary!"), our job is to mobilize popular anger into left-wing opposition to the Democrats and Corporate America. Only in this way can the Left offer an alternative to public discontent being exploited by the reactionary right around Trump and the Republicans.

## 3) Build a Revolutionary Marxist Wing of DSA

DSA campaigns for a fundamental alternative for working class and oppressed people starting with union rights for all workers, Medicare for All including abortion and reproductive healthcare, canceling student debt, a Green New Deal, immigrant rights and anti-racism. But above all DSA needs to link the fight for every reform to the need to overthrow capitalism, imperialism, and all systems of oppression in order to establish a democratic socialist society throughout the world.

Building a revolutionary Marxist wing of DSA that challenges the prevailing pragmatism, anarcho-liberalism, and reformism on the Left will provide a principled and strategic political center that can help us navigate the opportunist and sectarian pressures exerted on a mass socialist party rooted in the working class. If you agree, please join our caucus: [reformandrevolution.org/join/](http://reformandrevolution.org/join/)

Reform & Revolution is also eager to collaborate with other Marxist forces in DSA to identify common initiatives and campaigns to help strengthen DSA and build support within the organization for class struggle and Marxist politics.

ical assumptions that limit which facts are perceptible and how they are interpreted. It also shows us that many practical errors can be avoided with the assistance of a correct theory and the principles derived from it.

The pragmatic outlook at the DSA convention was accompanied by conservative complacency which maintained that socialists should continue with the basic strategy that has resulted in so much success over recent years. Yet a few weeks after the convention a number of events started to show that in fact, this strategy was increasingly impractical.

The “Bowman Affair” brought to the surface a growing unease with the opportunism of DSA’s four members of Congress (and DSA’s 150 elected members more generally). Increasingly, there is recognition that DSA has no meaningful say in the political positions or strategies of these representatives.

**Reform & Revolution** organized a discussion with **Andy Sernatinger** from the the Tempest Collective and **Brandon Madsen** from R&R about Bowman, Palestine and DSA. You can listen to that meeting at [tinyurl.com/RnR-BowmanPalestineDSA](https://tinyurl.com/RnR-BowmanPalestineDSA)

The November 2021 elections also revealed significant political vulnerabilities in the Left’s “Abolitionist” position when challenged by the right in front of mass working class audiences, including in communities of color.

The decisive defeat of DSA member India Walton in the Buffalo mayor’s race, despite winning the Democratic primary, has also shaken the belief that DSA has discovered a new formula for socialist success through the Democratic ballot line that had eluded socialists for the past 100+ years.

### The Coming Midterm Disaster for the Democrats

Biden and the Democrats, as the current managers of US capitalism, now oversee a society buffeted by a series of crises - an ongoing Covid pandemic, high levels of inflation hitting workers’ pocket books, structural racism and sexism, intensifying climate disaster, and non stop global instability and conflicts.

Biden’s average job approval dropped from a peak of 56 percent at the beginning of April 2021 to 40 percent in early February 2022 (Real Clear Politics). ABC News reported in November that “if the midterm elections were today, 51 percent of registered voters say they’d support the Republican candidate in their congressional district, 41 percent say the Democrat. That’s the biggest lead for Republicans in the 110 ABC/Post polls that have asked this question since November 1981.”

Barring a major change in the situation, Republicans are on course to take control of the House and possibly the Senate in the 2022 midterm elections. And lurking over the horizon is the ominous threat of Trump winning the 2024 Presidential election.

While the liberal media continues to obsess over January 6th and the danger of a far-right

insurrection, the reality is that the failure of the Democrats in power is what’s paving the way for a resurgence of Trump’s Republicans. To counter the danger of the Republicans, the Left must focus on organizing mass movements that can change the balance of power in society, along with building a working class alternative to the failed politics of the Democratic and Republican parties.

The Left has generally fallen into two traps in trying to understand and relate to the Biden administration. One is an ultra-left, dogmatic refusal to recognize that while Biden is a ruling class politician, he has swung away from neoliberalism, instead pursuing an alternative capitalist policy of liberal reforms (at least so far). The other, far more common mistake is an opportunist policy of supporting Biden, drawing away from adopting a militant oppositional position towards the Democratic leadership.

Biden and the Congressional Democratic leadership put forward a series of policies in 2021 that represented a distinct shift to the left compared to the Obama and Clinton administrations. Rather than neoliberal austerity, Biden pushed through the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan in March 2021. This was a continuation of the massive stimulus that Trump and the Democrats in Congress carried out in response to Covid, but with a more pronounced pro-worker slant. It provided additional \$1,400 relief payments, monthly child support payments, hundreds of billions of dollars in relief for state and local governments, and continued the major expansion of unemployment benefits through September 2021,

among other expansions of social welfare.

The result of this unprecedented surge in government spending under both Trump and Biden led to a significant fall in poverty in the US in 2020 (New York Times, September 14, 2021). It is also estimated that there was a further 40 percent fall in child poverty in 2021 as a result of Biden’s monthly child payments (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities).

This policy was a response by the ruling class to the danger of an economic meltdown, the need to mitigate the public health and social damage of Covid, an effort to upgrade US infrastructure in the face of growing competition from China, and a recognition from a wing of the establishment that social and economic inequality is reaching levels dangerous to the stability of US capitalism.

In line with this, Biden put forward even more ambitious policies such as a \$15 minimum wage, the PRO Act, and the Build Back Better social welfare bill. However, all of these have been blocked by a conservative wing of the Democrats, backed up by Corporate America’s hostility to higher taxes and stronger unions.

Given this stalled agenda, the defeats of the Democrats in the November 2021 elections, and plunging public support, Biden is signaling he will tack back towards the “center.”

### The Tasks for the Left

What are the main tasks for the Left in this situation? As Neal Meyer argued in *Jacobin*:



*[I]t's time for the left wing in Congress to call its millions of supporters and activists to action. Bernie could revive his promise to be an 'organizer in chief.' He may not be president, but he can still play that role.*

*With their resources and support, Bernie and the Squad could begin a relentless campaign of speeches, ads, petitions, rallies, marches, and demonstrations calling on Democrats to put the agenda they claim to support to a vote and to apply pressure against right-wing Democrats. They could rally unions and community organizations, or mobilize the tens of thousands of Democratic Socialists of America members ready to jump into a new national campaign, or link up with the 1.3 million workers whose union contracts expire this year and who might go on strike.*

*Why not organize a march on Washington? Or organize mass occupations of the offices of recalcitrant Democrats? ... Both Sinema and Manchin will be up for reelection in 2024. Start recruiting now, in a big and public manner, for primary challenges. Set up pickets outside the offices of Manchin and Sinema's major donors. After all, they're the ones who seem to call the shots.*

This is 100 percent correct and is part of the fundamental message that socialists in Congress, unions, and in different social movements need to hammer home again and again: We can not rely on Biden or the Democrats even if they pledge to vote the right way - working people need to organize determined mass struggle if we are to have a chance of overcoming the resistance of big business and right-wing Democrats.

# Build Back Never



BY ALEX STOUT

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## How the Democrats Sabotaged Themselves

West Virginia Senator and coal baron Joe Manchin, along with other right-wing Democrats like Senator Kyrsten Sinema from Arizona, have sabotaged efforts to pass significant legislation to tackle climate change, child poverty and more.

The Democratic Party is unable and unwilling to use its control of both houses of Congress and the White House to overcome this. In ruins are not just the hopes they created and the promises they made that brought them those majorities, but also any chance of salvaging their likely abysmal showing in the midterms.

The “progressive caucus” of the Democratic Party faces a complete disaster of its own making as well. Instead of leveraging the bipartisan infrastructure bill in order to force a vote on Build Back Better first, they surrendered and became completely insignificant as a force within the Democratic Party.

This also points to a major problem for Bernie Sanders and the Squad. Great speeches and even votes are not enough to pass or seriously alter legislation. If they don’t use their leverage outside of Congress, if they do not finally start to mobilize working class people, for example in DSA, for their interests and for a lasting change, they will not have the strength necessary to win the fights they pick in Congress.

## What Was at Stake?

The “Build Back Better” Framework/Act, AKA the budget reconciliation bill, was supposed to be the centerpiece of Joe Biden’s first term as President. Even beyond the sizable bills (especially the American Rescue Plan Act) passed

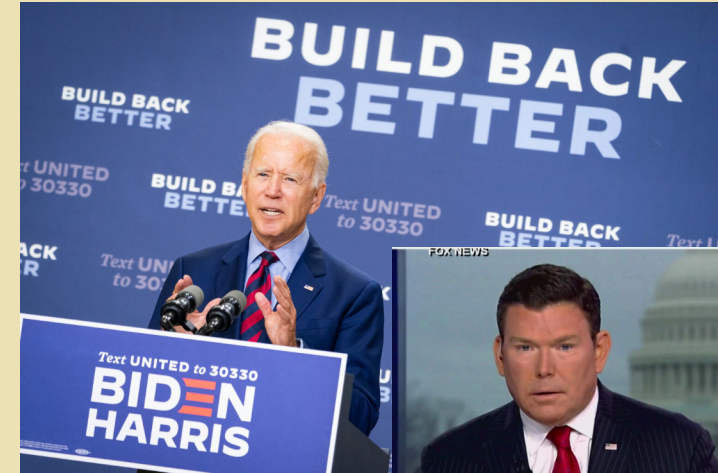
earlier in 2021, this legislation would have had an important impact on the millions of working families struggling under the weight of a pandemic and an economic crisis. Many have so far been forced to bear the weight of this crisis by working in unsafe conditions for poverty wages.

A number of labor organizing efforts in 2021 and beyond is a welcome sign that working people are beginning to fight for their welfare and build power on their own terms. Although Biden’s administration was initially willing to spend more than expected, it’s delivered far less than what is needed to match the scale of the crisis, and workers are getting sick of waiting.

Before Striketober, we were promised what Vox happily called a “big fucking deal” and Sanders praised as “the most consequential piece of legislation...since the Great Depression”: universal pre-k; 2 years of free community college and expanded pell grants; an expansion of the child tax credit; expanding Medicare to cover dental, vision, hearing, and lower prescription costs; expanded ACA credits; a substantial investment in clean energy; and more. It was even supposed to open up a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

All in all this would cost \$3.5 trillion over 10 years – itself a negotiation down from the \$6 trillion bill Sanders originally proposed. But we were told it was happening. The Democrats were going to bypass the filibuster and the Republicans, and they were going to deliver. Then the bill slowly vanished, piece by piece. \$3.5 trillion dropped to \$1.7 trillion, and now it appears completely stalled.

So what happened?



## Negotiation: A Question of Leverage

Senators Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin in particular have been the primary roadblocks within the Democratic Party on this bill. Sinema has refused to commit to passing the bill and even refuses to give a reason why, offering no demands and seeming to simply plan on obstructing it regardless. Manchin has been the focus of negotiations, because at least he has focused on the total cost and called for certain measures to be removed or scaled back. Even at less than half of the first compromise’s \$3.5 trillion figure, Manchin shows no signs of being swayed, no matter how many times the Democrats shoot themselves in the foot as a show of good faith.

If they still manage to pass the bill, it will be a pitiful showing, unlikely to impress the millions of struggling workers who were promised significant aid and then abandoned. The only way this would be different is if it were to pass under massive pressure from below, spurred on by a newly energized left with a highly visible national leadership.

The Democrats need all 48 of their senators (plus Bernie Sanders and Angus King, two



West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin chose a special place to kill Biden’s Build Back Better plan: He announced the end of it on Fox News. Photo 1) by Biden for President | Flickr/CC BY-SA 2.0. 2) Fox News Screenshot

independents who caucus with the Democrats) to vote in favor, or it won’t pass. So they have tied themselves to the limits imposed by Manchin, and are desperately trying to please him enough to agree to some boost in social spending. Of course this isn’t working, because the Biden administration has not applied any serious pressure on these right-wing Democrats. Without threatening to support primary challengers to boot them out of office, without withholding the funding and resources of the party machine, how could it be otherwise? Sanders has since suggested pushing through individual popular pieces of the Build Back Better Act, such as extending the child tax credit, and forcing the Republicans and right-wing Democrats to openly vote against them. Of course this isn’t enough either and would leave out important pieces of the bill, especially its environmental components.

Shrewd parliamentary tactics will not work without being bolstered by mass pressure from

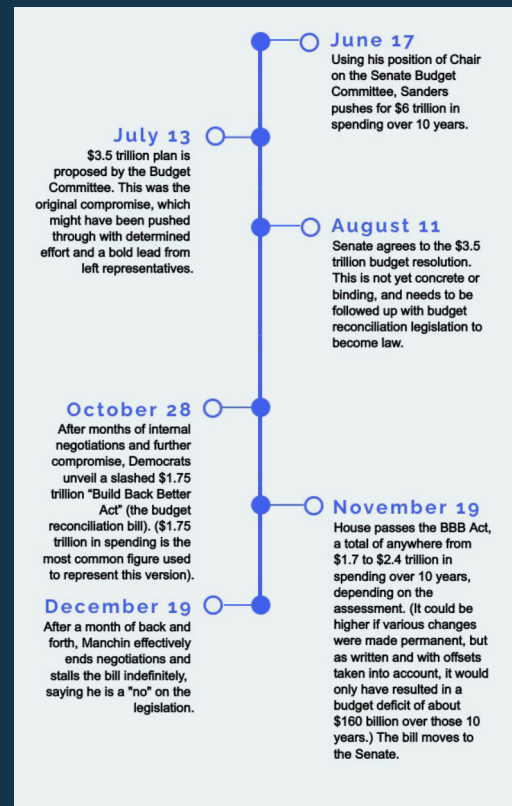
below. Figures like Sanders and the House representatives who make up “the Squad” - Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush - should try to make up for the weakness of the Biden administration by calling for and organizing mass protests directed at the Republican obstruction and at Sinema, Manchin, and other corporate Democrats. Smaller-scale demonstrations of this sort have already occurred in Arizona and West Virginia, but without the aid of a national spotlight they have so far been insufficient to force anyone’s hand.

Significant rallies and good messaging from Bernie and the Squad’s national platforms could have brought home that this is not about some numbers (\$6 trillion or \$1.7 trillion), but about keeping child benefits that reduced child poverty by 40 percent in the US. This is about a first, significant act to fight climate change. This is about expanding Medicare to vision, dental, and hearing care.

Would this have been successful? There are no guarantees, but starting with a rally with tens of thousands by Sanders and AOC in New York to test the waters and then spreading this around the country, our chances of movement building would have been dramatically better. Unfortunately, this was not the focus of Sanders and the Squad, nor did DSA call for such action. If they had, big rallies could have escalated to other forms of mass pressure, like mass occupations of Manchin and Sinema's offices, boycotts and pickets of their major donors, and launching a public campaign to recruit primary challengers. These types of tactics are not meant to convince the Democratic Party to fight for us. They are tactics that increase the awareness and organization of the working class while seeking to overcome the entrenched power of the Democrats, while providing substantial relief for working people.

By buying into the political methods of the Democratic Party and leaving the Biden admin-

## Timeline: Build Back Better Died Slowly



istration to its own incompetence, left-wing representatives are forgetting the key advantage that put them in office in the first place: the working class.

### The Progressives' Gambit

Negotiation in politics is about power and leverage. And from June through October, it seemed that the Progressive Caucus under the leadership of Washington Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal understood this. The plan was to refuse to pass the bipartisan \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill unless the Build Back Better Act passed first. The Progressive Caucus has nearly 100 members in the House, a significant enough percentage to use this type of leverage. For once, a section of the Democratic Party was behaving militantly in order to help pass a major social spending bill, despite outcry from mainstream media outlets.

But sure that giving up their bargaining chip could be spun as a victory, they caved to the imaginary pressure of not passing anything. Jayapal vouched for moderate promises to support "Build Back Better", but these were revealed to be worthless, and the action by Caucus members turned out to be a toothless capitulation. Jayapal assured us that we could trust the Biden White House to win Manchin's support for the legislation. Nothing happened.

Only the six members of the Squad voted against the infrastructure bill, offering clear-eyed warnings about what would happen. Now that the Build Back Better Act looks stalled (or even killed), the Squad is free to tell the rest of the Progressive Caucus that they told them so. But being right about bad compromises isn't enough. The left also needs power, and that comes from below.

### Socialist Caucus Needed to Help Unleash the Working Class

Left-leaning commentators were generally convinced that the Squad had been right all along. This gives them a big boost in credibility and makes it harder for those who disagree with their politics to paint them as dumb or naive. It also shredded the credibility of the Progressive Caucus, which had raised expectations and then failed to meet them. This combination of factors makes it a perfect time for the Squad to increase their independence from the Progressive Caucus and to increase their cohesion as their own group – a Socialist Caucus.

The united public face and strategic bloc votes of a Socialist Caucus would make it clear to everyone that the socialists in office represent a different political trend than the Democratic Party, or even the "Progressive" Caucus. Using their own caucus and unified public messaging will help ensure that even when the left doesn't win, the struggle still sharpens the division between the working class (and its broad left leadership) and the rest of the Democratic Party, which Bernie correctly pointed out has "turned its back on the working class." By linking such critiques to a Socialist Caucus with clear demands and a clear record, instead of to individual politicians, a case can be built for socialist politics that will outlast the politicians making it. Without yet separating from the Democratic Party, the Socialist Caucus can serve as a midway point, a broad left formation to strengthen our standing for a full break with the Democrats later.

The branding and platform of the Socialist Caucus would be a lever that can help to move a wider part of the working class into action, and it is this mass action that holds the power. Taking the right votes and making the right points will not matter if the distinction this creates between left representatives and the rest of the Democratic Party is not used to call for mass action and organization. Business as usual means the left loses votes as a tiny minority, and faces intense pressure to water down politics in an attempt to gain allies (e.g. from the Progressive Caucus). Instead, relying on mass action can produce pressure to better reach and better organize the working class, e.g. by establishing a Socialist Caucus, supporting unions, and recruiting new forces to



The House representatives who make up "the Squad" - from left to right: Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, Jamaal Bowman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), Cori Bush and Ayanna Pressley - should try to make up for the weakness of the Biden administration by calling for and organizing mass protests directed at the Republican obstruction and at Sinema, Manchin, and other corporate Democrats.

Photo of the extended "Squad", posted by Cori Bush on Jan 3, 2021 on Twitter.

DSA and stay organized for the fights ahead.

The Progressive Caucus's gambit would have been a good one had they not given up and relied on backroom deals and "good faith" negotiations. The most important thing for a Socialist Caucus would be to sharply disavow fruitless maneuvers and champion socialist politics and methods of struggle. Doing so would amplify its strength because it would root them more firmly within labor and social movements, even when a campaign fails to lead to an immediate victory. This could be done even more effectively if the announcement of the Socialist Caucus included a public break with the Progressive Caucus – openly framed as a sort of dress rehearsal for a future break from the Democratic Party.

The Squad was elected because people saw represen-

tatives who promised to actually fight for what we needed, who promised to put human need ahead of the usual considerations of cost and "political viability". It is time for these representatives to distance themselves from the stink of the Progressive Caucus, and more clearly, publicly, and boldly proclaim that they represent a different political trend from the rest of the Democratic Party. A Socialist Caucus is an immediate step that is achievable now, enhancing the efficacy and independent profile of elected socialists; and it is steps like this which can prepare the ground for the fully independent political position we need – a Democratic Socialist Party.

*Alex Stout is a member of DSA and the Reform & Revolution caucus. They are the chair of the Phoenix DSA labor committee.*

# “Our Platform Was Strong on Public Safety”



BY KIP HEDGES

@CWHEDGES15

**Interview with Robin Wonsley Worlobah, newly elected socialist council member in Minneapolis**

Robin Wonsley Worlobah got elected to the city council in Minneapolis in November 2021. She ran as a DSA member and as an unapologetically independent of the Democratic Party (and its Minnesota franchise, the DFL). Her campaign, born out of the uprising for Black Lives in 2020, had to overcome the backlash against the demand to defund the police and inspire working class people to get involved in the struggle for a different kind of safety for working class people, for rent control and much more. Kip Hedges spoke with Robin to elaborate on the campaign and the next steps forward in movement building.

**In the summer of 2020, you decided to run for city council in Minneapolis, in Ward 2. What were your thoughts at that time?**

Summer 2020, we were in the middle of one of the most historic uprisings in US history after the murder of George Floyd, here in Minneapolis. And Ward 2 was right at the core of it. We had the combat zone, which was the Third Precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department. So I spent most of my summer alongside my DSA comrades doing mutual aid work for neighbors and many of the civilian protesters, making

sure that they had access to food, supplies, and medical care.

For me, the decision became very clear when I went to a Ward 2 event. The incumbent city council member in Ward 2 held a meeting about the pathway forward around public safety. Everyone there was so upset because he had no proposals. His only proposal was to send an email. It was so uninspiring. We were in this moment and my city council member was unaware of what was happening around him.

People at the meeting, several hundred, wanted to transform public safety so we don't have black and brown people being killed again and again. And the state was attacking working class people who were grieving again and again.

So I think that was the moment that it was clear. No proposals. Nothing from the City or any political leaders

throughout the summer of 2020. The political establishment couldn't meet the needs and the will of the people. In fact, it was working class people and community groups on the ground that were organizing to meet those needs in the absence of the state.

It soon became very clear that our city was entering into a revolutionary moment. And with that realization, it also became clear that our city had been and was in dire need of revolutionary leaders, who could bring the working-



class power that was being built and demonstrated on the ground into spaces of power. Spaces like City Hall which had been complicit in creating the conditions that lead to the execution of George Floyd, and the uprising that followed. So, it was no surprise that those transformative months of the uprising ultimately inspired me to step up and throw my hat in the ring for our upcoming city council elections.

**There were three other candidates that ran, and you were able to defeat a 16 year incumbent, Cam Gordon, a Green Party candidate who was regarded by many as pretty progressive. And you alluded to him in your last answer. And you also defeated Yusra Arab, a Somali woman who had the backing of the monied class of Minneapolis. And then Tom Anderson who was similar in politics to Yusra but was not the chosen candidate of those with a lot of money. How were you able to actually win?**

I was very fortunate to be able to pull together a team of experienced Marxist organizers. I'm being very clear about that. We walked into this race knowing that, yes, we had an incumbent who represented left of center progressive politics in Minneapolis. We also knew there was a counter movement to the uprising that took place in the summer of 2020. We saw the political and corporate establishment really consolidate around this question of public safety as a way to maintain the status quo. They were galvanizing working class black leaders to speak against reform.

This was partly due to the weaknesses of the proposal, a ballot initiative, for a new public safety department that was proposed to replace the MPD. The proposal lacked clarity. This particular weakness would ultimately be leveraged by the opposition in successfully defeating the ballot amendment.

The Star Tribune, Minneapolis' major newspaper, was printing regular editorials raising the fear of crime and speaking against meaningful change. They didn't want to take up any new proposals to actually address structural inequities that exist under capitalism.

We knew we were in a moment of reaction and I knew it was going to be imperative that I had a team who could understand the political conditions that we were in and how to navigate that and how to study and adapt to the ever changing terrain. I mean, we were talking about starting in summer 2020, and by

spring of 2021, we were still knee deep in a devastating pandemic and our city and state was failing to respond to that in a meaningful way.

Then we also had the trial of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who killed George Floyd, that only happened as a result of the uprising. And then we had the public execution of Daunte Wright and a revitalization of a smaller uprising in Brooklyn Center. There was the struggle around the pipeline, Line 3. We had so much happening in that moment and I needed a team that was going to be very clear and focused. What is the political program that we're building? How are we going to test this on the ground?

It was imperative to not only have a team of folks who had a Marxist analysis but also those open to it. I was really proud of the fact that our team brought in a lot of new DSA members who had not organized before and we were able



to have political discussions and debates among our team to really assess what we were doing. How should we be framing our own program around public safety? There was a massive vacuum on the left in relation to how working class people should orient themselves towards our pro-MPD opponent's effective organizing. After many discussions and debates, my team decided that we would put out a socialist vision of public safety to the public and test its receptivity on the ground.

While we were building out our political program, we still had to hit doors. We had to do all the typical things you need to do when trying to run a successful electoral campaign. We door knocked many times, held phone banks, and organized numerous fundraising events.

Through developing a strong political program and electoral strategy, my team was able to not only defeat a 16-year Green Party incumbent but also a corporate-backed challenger. By complementing a socialist program with a focused field strategy, we were able to expose a number of things about our opponents that helped to crystallize that our socialist vision and leadership was what was most needed in City Hall at this historic moment.

*We were effective because our program focused on the public aspect of public safety.*

What I am most proud of is that we ran an effective Socialist electoral campaign that

both pointed out the ways that racial capitalism failed to meet working class people's needs and offered ideas about what would work. Neither one of our opponents were doing that. They brought nothing new to the table and the advocacy for failed "progressive" tactics and the status quo simply didn't resonate with working class people. Both of my challengers failed to inspire people in such a critical moment that our city was undergoing. And we were able to do that.

**You and your team, I noticed on your website, did not call for defunding the police. Why was that?**

That took a lot of internal debates, because many of us were involved in the defund efforts of summer 2020 and we saw how the state went on an aggressive attack against that. They wanted to discredit and defeat a charter amendment that was proposed at that time to revamp public safety in Minneapolis. All across the country the political establishment was on the attack against those who would make fundamental changes to public safety. The uprising here inspired uprisings in all 49 other states. So every single city and state in this country was wrestling with the failures of the police state in the wake of George Floyd.

Corporate mouthpieces like the Star Tribune were ramping up fear around an increase in crime, murders and car jackings. And these crimes were actually increasing and they used this to say that we cannot entertain defund. We saw that dynamic and, again, because we had a disciplined team, and we dedicated time to note these political shifts. We recognized that we had to come

with a different type of political approach. The political establishment was able to frame "defund" around this deficit, this framework of absence. And I think our proposal was really able to say like, "No, there's a presence of something more. We actually have the ability to abundantly invest in our communities and build a public safety system that guarantees everyone's safety."

Under racial capitalism, we know the police are largely used to protect private assets, private capital. And if you do not own private capital and are not considered to be a part of the public, which has historically been black and brown and working class people and women, and LGBT folks. Then safety for you looks like random traffic stops, "use of force", stop and frisks, tasers, pepper spray, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Our socialist public safety program was able to get at the core of that and effectively relate it to the public.

We were effective because our program focused on the public aspect of public safety. It also re-centered public safety as a public good and thus everyone, no matter their race, class, immigration status, gender, deserves the most equitable and highest quality public safety system possible. We also highlighted that public safety is much more than policing. Real public safety requires public stability. Meaning governments should be making mass investments in housing, public education, and healthcare, the things that actually keep working class people safe.

Our program also advocated for the expansion of the unarmed workforce. City data showed that 70 percent of 911



A Louisville mural to remember Breonna Taylor and George Floyd

Photo: Don Sniogowski, [tinyurl.com/TaylorFloyd](https://tinyurl.com/TaylorFloyd), Copyright: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/)

calls required an unarmed response. So, why not invest in an unarmed workforce where we actually send out mental health providers, we actually send out trained professionals who specialize in domestic violence to tend to the various types of crises that ordinary people experience daily?

To summarize, our program basically said, "Look, the current offering of policing that we have, it's a bread crumb. A socialist platform offers you a whole buffet of things to really help you navigate crises but also stabilize your lives. And that's inherently contradictory to racial capitalism." We were very clear, too, that whatever we do, as long as the system of racial capitalism exists, the

police state is always going to be there to reinforce those conditions.

As socialists, our charge is to rectify those unequal conditions but also with the goal of weakening racial capitalism and replacing it with democratic structures, structures that aren't governed by profits, by shareholders, by CEOs, but actually by the working class people. So we got to test these ideas throughout the campaign trail. This is why I think electoral campaigns offer really good terrain for socialists to organize around socialist ideas. That ability to connect our Socialist ideas, especially around public safety, directly to working class people at the doors is largely why our platform was

among the strongest in this public safety debate here in Minneapolis and still remains one the strongest as we try to figure out how we move forward.

**The Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Council – the developers – have really portrayed themselves as having been triumphant in the 2021 election. They say their candidate for mayor won, Jacob Frey, and he defeated two more progressive candidates for Mayor. Frey's efforts to give himself more powers as mayor won in the form of a city charter change. The amendment that you were referring to earlier around**

public safety was also defeated. And there were some progressive city council members who were defeated and replaced by more conservative city council members. At the same time, there are three socialist DSA candidates on the city council. So how do you analyze that? What do you make of those apparently contradictory phenomena? Are we witnessing the birthing of something new?

I think absolutely. In 2017 a “progressive” majority was elected to the Minneapolis city council. They said, “we are going to change all the things.” And then the pandemic happened, George Floyd happened, and then the uprising happened. What the ruling class and the political establishment, the Downtown Council, and Chamber of Commerce were able to say was, “The failures that we’re experiencing right now are because the progressives don’t know how to govern. They are the ones who created these conditions that we’re experiencing.”

So they were able to manipulate the failures of racial capitalism to be the fault of progressive wing. And the liberals did contribute to George Floyd. We had these progressive Democrats who were helping make these weakened policies around public safety, constantly regurgitating reforms that have been tried and tried, not really taking on the forces of capital that have the desire to protect the status quo at all costs.

Progressives go in to basically nibble around the inequities and all you do is end up deepening them.

*We know rent control is going to be one of the key fights that our office is going to take up.*

So I think we are seeing the birth of something new because the progressive wing

## ROBIN for MINNEAPOLIS

More on Robin Wonsley Worlobah’s campaign:

RobinForMpls.com

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was decimated. I mean, we’re talking about one survivor from that wing right now on the city council. It ultimately showed the failure of liberal politics. And while I know a lot of working class people, especially on the left in Minneapolis, felt a huge wave of despair with the election results, I do think we’re seeing something different in the wake of three socialists being able to win and one of those three socialists, myself, being independent of the Democratic Party.

So I think there’s a multitude of things that are happening. You’re seeing that working class people are open to political options outside of the

Democratic party, and political options that are grounded in a populist political framework, that not only prioritizes the public good but also places working people at the core of deciding how our city is going to be run.

But also people are interested in how we make that happen. We clearly tried the tactic of electing the good folks into office to do these things and that didn’t happen. So it also creates this opening of, wait, so there’s a different way in which we have to create change now. All of us newly elected council members, Jason Chavez, Aisha Chughtai and myself, were the ones who ran really impressive ground games, and that showed in the voter results. Across the board, our election results showed that voters in our ward were not supportive of the ballot initiative, Question One, which consol-

idated more power in the mayor and really the ruling class of Minneapolis. We all turned out higher voter support for Question Two in amending the city charter to create a new department of public safety. And across our respective campaigns and in our wards all voted in support of Question Three, creating a pathway to pass rent control.

So all of us not only said we support these key things to create a more just and equitable democracy, but we publicly called attention to the forces, like corporate developers, that are not allies in this fight to guarantee housing to everyone or to provide a system of public safety that

doesn’t only work just for the rich. We were not only able to successfully create a public campaign around this socialist vision and these specific issues, but we were actually able to connect working class people to the movements organizing behind it. Not only did they show up at the polls, they showed up at rent control events. They showed up at protests against police violence. So I think we are seeing the birth of something new and I’m really excited to work with my DSA comrades to expand these openings even further, especially around the rent control fight. I think that’s going to offer really good ground for us to show working class people how to fight differently for our interests under right-wing conditions.

**You and your city council staff have decided to donate a portion of your salaries to fund a community office right in Ward 2. How does that fit into your vision of mass politics and creating mass politics**

**around a multiracial working class movement? Are there other things? You’ve mentioned rent control and the movement around that. How can those kinds of movements or fights be used to create that mass politics?**

My team is super excited about moving forward with creating a ward office. People can come by to talk about fixing potholes. But we also want to be an organizing hub. We want it to be an extension of exactly what we did during the campaign. How are we bringing in Ward 2 residents, also residents across the city, to have these conversations? And even debates about the issues that impact our everyday lives and to connect them to new ideas which working people are organizing around, both locally, but also across the nation?

We know rent control is going to be one of the key fights that our office is going to take up. We want our ward office to be

a hub in organizing canvases, and organizing national forums where we’re bringing in experts to talk to residents about the ways in which we can actually address housing inequities. There are cities that have passed rent control, especially stronger control policies and they’re surviving.

So we want our office to be a source of information and a place for discrediting the false ideas of our opposition. We want our ward office to be a place where working people can break out of isolation and collaborate with each other. Solidarity is the key to our success.

*Kip Hedges is a revolutionary socialist member of DSA in Twin Cities DSA. He was a baggage handler for 28 years for Delta Air Lines at Minneapolis International Airport as a member of the International Association of Machinists. He now drives a school bus in St. Paul, Minnesota, as a Teamster. He continues to be deeply involved in efforts to transform the labor movement.*



# reform & revolution

The Reform & Revolution caucus of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) stands in the revolutionary socialist tradition which fights to end economic inequality, racism, sexism, and all forms of oppression.

The resurgence of socialist ideas and the explosive growth of DSA represent the biggest opportunity in decades to build a mass socialist movement in the United States. Our caucus stands for **building DSA into a mass socialist party** rooted in the struggles of the working class and the oppressed. We also seek to contribute to the construction of an **organized Marxist current** within DSA which is committed to **international socialism**.

Our magazine strives to provide a forum for **lively debate** on the program and strategy that social movements need, drawing on lessons from past struggles.

We view the **capitalist system** — with its nonstop global competition for profits and power — as the main driver behind inequality, oppression, and the climate crisis. We stand for bringing the major corporations that dominate the economy into public ownership and replacing the anarchy of the market with democratic economic planning in order to meet the needs of people and the planet.

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