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Prophecies and Predictions**

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Articles signed by an author do not necessarily reflect the opinion of our caucus. We welcome letters to the editor and proposals for articles and reviews.

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Prophecies and Perspectives



BY THE EDITORS

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“We are facing a regime change from a period of relative stability to an era of severe instability, conflict, and chaos,” predicts economist Nouriel Roubini in his new book, *Megathreats*. His rose-tinted view of the past, that “each generation, in most nations, has been able to improve their standard of living compared to their parents’ and grandparents’ generations,” over the last 75 years, is rather questionable on a global scale. Nonetheless, when looking at climate change, huge economic bubbles and rising inter-imperialist conflict, his grim conclusions about the future mirror the dark outlook instinctively held by many regular people when they look around at today’s socioeconomic reality: “without amazing luck, almost unprecedented economic growth, and unlikely global cooperation, this won’t end well.”

There is a new world-historical conjuncture, bringing with it all sorts of prophecies and predictions. Capitalism leaves people without much control over their lives. Higher forces, it appears, determine our fate - and perhaps this offers a hint to understanding the continued popularity of astrology and other forms of divination today. In any case, there is no better time for the left to offer up its own system for predicting the future. Marx was right 150 years ago on a whole range of fundamental issues, which allowed him to predict much about the direction of capitalist society’s development with remarkable accuracy. Marxism remains an indispensable toolkit for analyzing the world – and for changing it. In this spirit, we offer our predictions.

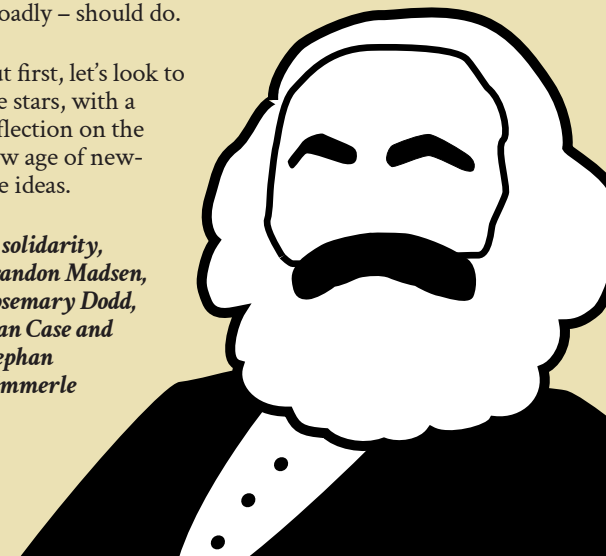
As Marxists, we in Reform & Revolution stand for the reorganization of global relations and the world economy on a democratic socialist basis, in global cooperation based on environmental, economic, racial, and gender justice. We outline perspectives – analyze the paths along which the conditions of struggle in the US and globally are most likely to develop – in order to help arm and prepare ourselves and the wider working class as effectively as possible for the battles ahead.

Global trends are the basis for developments in all countries; that’s one of the reasons we are internationalists. Climate change is threatening the very existence of human life on this planet as we know it. Natural disasters with all their rippling impacts, refugee crises, a widening gap between rich and poor – all these and more pose the need to fight for a fundamental change in the near future. The imperialist rivalries – especially between the US and China, but also in the form of proxy wars, as we can see in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – are posing new threats around the globe. The growing economic nationalism (or “protectionism”) is a predictable reaction against the crises and failures of neoliberal globalization, but it poses new economic risks of its own that are no less severe. The socialist movement is weaker now than it was throughout most of the 20th century, as evidenced by a conspicuous lack of working-class consciousness, working-class organization, and working-class leadership all around the globe.

While not fully drawn out here due to length considerations, global trends such as these serve as the foundation and background for the US perspectives laid out in this issue’s featured article by Rosemary Dodd. It not only sketches out the key lines of development in the US situation but also grapples with how these inform what DSA – and the labor and socialist movements more broadly – should do.

But first, let’s look to the stars, with a reflection on the new age of new-age ideas.

*In solidarity,
Brandon Madsen,
Rosemary Dodd,
Sean Case and
Stephan
Kimmerle*



Politics of the Stars



BY ALEX MONI-SAURI

📍 A.MONI.SAURI

Astrology and Other Forms of Mysticism Experience an Upsurge.

Capitalist society sells us a world of myth: the myth of meritocracy, of the American Dream, of bourgeois democracy, of an equal relationship between ruling and working classes. New generations increasingly embrace astrology, tarot, and other forms of mysticism in a rejection of the institutional, patriarchal religions of their parents and grandparents. But if mysticism from below is the answer to mysticism from above, political terrain gets complicated.

The Spiritual Marketplace

There's a spiritual revival underway in the US, and market growth to prove it. A January article from Harper's Bazaar titled "How Millennials and Gen Z turned astrology into a billion-dollar industry" reports that astrology, tarot, palm readings, and other mystical services are worth \$2.2 billion globally, and growing an average of 0.5 percent each year. According to trend-forecasting agency WGSN, "62 percent of Gen Z and 63 percent of millennials say their zodiac sign accurately represents their personality traits, with many also leveraging astrology to help make life decisions – from dating to career direction and even finances."

People have long looked to the stars for reflections of

reality. In *The Human Cosmos: Civilization and the Stars*, journalist Jo Marchant tracks this ancient relationship with the sky from early cave art in Lascaux, France and "eclipse-obsessed Babylonians" to the birth of Christianity and modern science. She argues that "our innate relationship with the stars shaped who we are – our religious beliefs, power structures, scientific advances and even our biology. But over the last few centuries we have separated ourselves from the universe that surrounds us. And that disconnect comes at a cost."

63 percent of millennials say their zodiac sign accurately represents their personality traits"

Life under capitalism is marked by alienation: from our resources and labor, our communities and leisure, the earth and the stars. The desire for an integrated existence between humanity and the world around us – with access to nutritious food, clean water, clean air, and healthy spaces – appears across a spectrum of earth-based spirituality and lifestyle movements as well as celestial divination practices.

Millennials and Gen Z, (the generations responsible for this spiritual boom), grew up during a significant recession with accelerating climate change and endless war, experiencing the chronic



failure of our institutions to serve the public good or ensure the basic means to life. Young people today are seeking the same things people have sought in religion for centuries (a sense of purpose, community, guidance, etc.) and are finding alternatives to the patriarchal monotheistic religions so enmeshed in US politics and consumer culture as to seem baked-in. This is especially true in queer spaces, in which the inclusive and affirming language of love and light stands in contrast to tired screeds about sexual morality, gender roles, and the denial of trans people's right to exist.

Postmodern Rejection of Science

It's part of the broader postmodern reaction against a stiff mechanistic view of reality and codified hierarchies of mind over body, logic over feeling, Man over nature, and other binary simplifications on the theme.

Marchant expresses this reaction strongly and often in *The Human Cosmos*:

Science has been wildly successful ... But it has also dissolved much of the meaning that [early] cultures found in life. Earth has been knocked from the center of existence to the suburbs; life reframed as a random accident; and God dismissed altogether, now that everything can be explained by physical laws. Far from having a meaningful role in the cosmic order, we're "chemical scum," as physicist Stephen Hawking put it, on the surface of a medium-sized planet orbiting an unremarkable star.

Her argument here reveals a popular straw man: the identification of science itself, in its attempt to objectively measure the world, as the force that has degraded meaning and stripped our cultures of soul. This obscures the totalizing force of global capital, which dictates the scope, focus, and application of scientific research, and which alienates us from purpose and meaning in our lives so thoroughly it can be hard to see a way forward.

Marxists should engage with the desires propelling this wave of spiritualism: connection to each other, purpose in our lives, a sense of wonder and awe, clarity, agency, and a path forward.

It's true that the ideological revolution toward science was initially a byproduct of capitalism; its need to develop the productive forces of society drove the scientific advances of the Enlightenment, revolutionizing our tools and methods as well as the

skills and techniques of workers. This was a source of increasing wealth for society when capitalism was still a progressive system. But capitalism is no longer developing conditions for human wealth. On the contrary – with each new day, conditions for human life on this planet deteriorate. Does this mean science is to blame?

Postmodernism, in its rejection of Enlightenment ideas, claims that objectivity does not exist. It presents all of human knowledge – theory, history, and empirical science – as subjective narratives to be combined or discarded at will.

This atmosphere of ethereal, selectable truth is deeply unmooring; the supremacy of singular, individual experience is isolating and lonely. Worse, such a framework will not allow us to use the scientific achievements that have outgrown capitalism today to reorganize the world. The skills, technology, and resources exist to produce enough food for every human on earth, to guarantee affordable housing and dignified work without destroying the planet. The question is how to make this a reality: how to use scientific advancement in the service of humanity and the planet rather than private profit. Such a question calls for collectively developing a scientific understanding of the world around us – and how to change it.

Borne Back into the Past

Political consciousness in the US today is marked by a fixation on origins and the idealized past. Theorist Wendy Brown argues that the end of the twentieth century, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, saw liberals and Marxists alike losing faith in the future, rejecting "a historiography bound to a notion of progress," but not replacing it with a new framework for understanding where we came from and where we're going.

For liberals, this has meant a hyper-fixation on the moral failings of the past (think the New York Times' "1619 Project") without diagnosing the contemporary architects of despair, poverty, and war – i.e. defense contractors, finance capital, landlordism, and the politicians that benefit from the capitalist system.

As historian Matthew Karp writes in *History as End: Politics of the Past*:

Such a critique of capitalism quickly becomes a prisoner of its own heredity. A more creative historical politics would move in the opposite direction, recognizing that the power of American capitalism does not reside in a genetic code written four hundred years ago. What would

it mean, when we look at US history, to follow William James in seeking the fruits, not the roots?

Taken at face value, (or passively absorbed through cultural osmosis), astrology would seem to hold that our personality traits, behaviors, and motivations are fixed and unchanging across time; that there is a predetermined moral arc to the unfolding of events; and that the hidden forces influencing reality are primarily immaterial and metaphysical, unbound by time or historical context. This works for a zeitgeist obsessed with origins and original sin. Ultra-personalized daily horoscopes and birth charts fit beside other categories of self as people search for identity in an uncertain world. And in the face of compounding, planet-sized crises, ideologies that deny or devalue material reality can offer a sense of relief, clarity, and control.

Spiritual influencers make a doctor's salary by monetizing stories about how they manifested the life of their dreams, and how you can too – if you do the proper inner work, cleanse yourself of toxins, and embrace your shadow selves. Like many strains of New Age thought, it becomes an isolated and isolating project of self-optimization that bestows all power and responsibility onto the individual: reality exists in your own thoughts, which you're free to alter at will. It points away from the collective nature of our power structures, away from developing class consciousness, and away from class politics entirely.

Politics of the Stars: Left and Right

That's not to say these ideas don't have political impact – in fact, they have representatives. Marianne Williamson, self-help author and celebrity spiritual adviser who ran for President in 2020, recently announced her 2024 Presidential campaign. In 2020, her New Age language about the "dark psychic force of collectivized hatred" and her intention to "harness love for political purposes" felt kooky and unserious in a heated political context. Now, this language has become so familiar and so generalized that it might not stand out at all – and could make her more appealing to younger voters.

Other figures on the liberal left are integrating New Age language and ideas into their platforms and political messaging, like social justice astrologer Chani Nicholas. In an LA Times interview from 2018, Nicholas links the rise in popularity of both astrology and socialism to the collective yearning "to return to something." She points to "a rejection of things that don't work," and looks to the past: "Socialism isn't new, and astrology definitely isn't



new, and earthly spirituality or living in accordance with the earth's rituals isn't new, it's ancient. I think we're yearning for something that technology cannot give us, that capitalism cannot give us."

Indeed. The re-popularization of socialist ideas and the growth of DSA in recent years points to a consciousness looking for alternatives. But the US left is weak, DSA has stagnated, and confusion about class politics obscures a clear path forward. When DSA working groups start integrating the language of astrology into their political graphics and messaging, or when popular astrologers make Instagram reels tying the collapse of the Silicon Valley Bank to Pluto entering its final stage of Capricorn, clarity about our wordly causes of suffering and the material solutions available to us becomes even more elusive.

But New Age ideas don't only drift left – take the spectacle of the QAnon "shaman" parading through the Capitol on January 6 for one infamous example. While much of the spiritual content is couched in the language of wellness and divinity, it's a landscape riddled with paranoia, conspiratorial thinking, and exploitation.

Matthew Remski, Derek Beres, and Julian Walker document this phenomenon on the podcast "Conspirituality," in which they trace the wellness-to-alt-right pipeline and unpack the sociopolitical conditions driving a new wave of moral panic:

At best, the conspiratorial movement attacks public health efforts in times of crisis. At worst, it fronts and recruits for the fever-dream of QAnon. As the alt-right and New Age horseshoe toward each other in a blur of disinformation, clear discourse and good intentions get smothered. In the process, spiritual beliefs that have nurtured creativity and meaning are transforming into memes of a quickly-globalizing paranoia.

And it's not new. Connections between mysticism and fascist ideology are well documented, as in the spiritual movements of early twentieth century Europe which lent spiritual weight to ideas of racial purity and Aryan superiority. The conditions of that period were similar to today: imperialist war, economic chaos, and deteriorating faith in democracy or progress.

Marxism and Astrology: What's the Right Approach?

Now in our third year of the pandemic, we're still battling the effects of prolonged isolation and rampant disinformation about science and public health. With the mainstreaming of conspiratorial thinking and the political entrenchment of QAnon lore – amidst escalating attacks on LGBT+ rights, pushed by pundits invoking fascist motifs of endangered children and Satanic abuse – Marxists should take an earnest, compassionate look into what's driving so many to embrace astrology and mysticism. We should draw out fatalist, reactionary narratives woven between ideals of divinity and wellness, and expose the political figures and movements tapping these spiritual currents to stoke cultural division and push repressive legislation.

But it should be done without dismissiveness, or lead-footed assertions of certainty about existential questions that have captured the human imagination since the dawn of time. Instead of citing one-liners about "the opium of the masses" or "the metaphysics of dunces," (Marx and Adorno, respectively), Marxists should engage with the shared desires propelling this wave of spiritualism: connection to each other and the world around us; purpose and meaning in our lives; a sense of wonder and awe; clarity, agency, and a path forward.

Astrology is both descriptive and interpretive; it offers reflections of ourselves that make people feel seen; it foregrounds interdependence with one

another, with our planet and our universe. It's a theory of existence and a system of interpretation that expands the window of perspective beyond a human frame. As with any form of spirituality, asking it to be proven to a scientific standard is missing the point; it's a creative act. It's about storytelling.

If we don't connect with these impulses, we know the alt-right will. In an essay for Verso called "Acid fascism: Past and present ties between occultism and the far right," author Phil Jones writes:

Mystics, of course, cannot see the future. But they can, like other political actors, will it into being with their ideas and actions. Questions about truth become musings on an elite cabal; 'toxins' offer a ready metaphor for immigrants, and followers are urged to become "spiritual leaders." The purveyors of these ideas promise a gnostic awakening, the ability to transcend an unsatisfying existence of ignorance and misery.

The antidote to such an existence lies in the key contribution of Marxism: scientific socialism. In contrast to the wishful thinking of early utopian socialists, Marx and Engels developed their understanding of capitalism and the power of the working class to end it on the basis of systematic analysis. Both the crisis-driven anarchy of the markets and the process of working-class struggle can be studied from a scientific perspective.

Marxism gives us a framework and language to understand the world that reflects our lived experience; it has answers for brutality, injustice, and systemic corruption; it illuminates our agency in shaping the world we want to live in, and locates our power concretely in collective action. Its method of analysis, rooted firmly in material reality, allows us to experience confusion and uncertainty without moral panic. It assumes a position of openness to new possibilities and shifting unknowns, approaching the past as a guide for the future instead of dooming blueprint or fixed genetic code.

What would it mean to seek the fruits, not the roots? It's hard to imagine worlds we haven't seen yet; our job as Marxists is to insist on possibility and fight for a future we deserve. Imagine the possibilities – for scientific research and development, for holistic health and wellness, for enriching and nurturing spiritual practices – of a world that isn't bound to the soulless objectives of capital. ■

Alex Moni-Sauri is an artist and writer and a member of Reform and Revolution. She lives in Washington state.

Sustained Pessimism



BY ROSEMARY DODD

📍 MARXIST_BARBIE

What's in the Cards for the Left? More Malaise and Stagnation, or Can We Grow?

“We have never before seen this level of sustained pessimism in the 30-year-plus history of the poll,” NBC wrote on January 30. 71 percent of Americans believe “the country is headed in the wrong direc-

tion,” and more than two thirds have shared this view since October 2021.

Frequent mass shootings – a clear sign of societal rot caused by a hyper-individualist, militaristic culture – terrorize everything from parades, to schools, to queer bars. Substance use is sky-high, with drug overdoses stealing 100,306 lives during a 12-month period ending in April 2021, an increase of 28.5 percent from the year before. Environmental disasters caused by climate change and corporate negligence wreak havoc all over the country.

This malaise has seeped into the left as well, which is reflected in the lull in social movements: the last mass movement was the Black Lives Matter uprising in 2020. Previously, the two Bernie campaigns gave the left in general and DSA in particular a much-needed influx of energy and radicalizing youth and workers after the near complete collapse of the socialist movement after the fall of Stalinism and the Soviet Union.

However, while still numerically powerful with around 85,000 members, our organization lost around 15 percent of its membership and is struggling to find itself. While an upsurge in labor organizing is providing much-needed hope, so far union membership is still in decline.

To put this lull into context and discover what we can do about it, let's take a look at some of the key features of today's political landscape.

Recession and the “No Landing” Myth

Prediction: Zombie banks and corporations as well as debt and speculation bubbles pose an ongoing threat, especially with the Fed raising interest rates. In the best case, working-class people will face continuing stagnation. In the worst case, a deeper crisis will drag down living conditions even more.

Inflation is still eating into workers' wages. At the

end of January, the consumer price index was up 6.4 percent year over year, while wages have risen by just 5.1 percent according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Between January 2022 and January 2023, real wages decreased by 0.9 percent. And inflation isn't done with us yet.

Although the jobs market remains strong with unemployment at 3.6 percent, the Fed sees low unemployment as a problem, not a silver lining. The central bank *wants* higher unemployment and lower wages, and capitalist commentators complain that “ongoing labor shortages continue to keep upward pressure on wages” (CNN, February 24), blaming this – rather than record corporate profits – for inflation. The Fed policy, backed by the Biden Administration, is to use the blunt tool of rate hikes to increase unemployment and drive down already low wages.

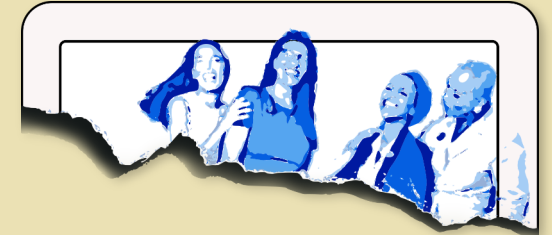
Despite the Fed's best efforts, we still aren't in a recession by most metrics, and some outlets and commentators have suggested that we can avoid recession altogether. But economist David Rosenberg called “The ‘no landing’ narrative... the biggest hoax Wall Street economists have peddled since ‘global decoupling’ in 2008.” By “no landing,” he means “hopes that the Federal Reserve can crush inflation without causing growth to stagnate or unemployment to spike.”

Indeed, the idea that the Biden administration and the Central Bank can stop inflation with nothing but rate hikes while avoiding recession is absurd: as long as the government sits on its hands and allows Fed policy to be the only response to our economic woes, some degree of recession is overwhelmingly likely.

The recent collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Signature Bank reveals the fragility of the banking sector. Interest rate hikes were the catalyst, but it was years of reckless speculation by banks and investors based on the myth that money would be cheap forever that caused the collapse. The key driver for the bubbles of speculation that intermittently ravage the economy is the super-rich searching for profitable outlets for their obscene fortunes – in Marxist terms, the over-accumulation of capital. The bailout of SVB depositors, who are almost entirely venture capitalists and tech startups, shows that the government sees protecting the interests of such investors as vital to the economy. In contrast, even modest programs for poor and working people are deemed too expensive.

Escalating Attacks on our Bodies

Prediction: The right will continue to attack abortion and trans people, but this approach will backfire – mass anger will eventually bring people



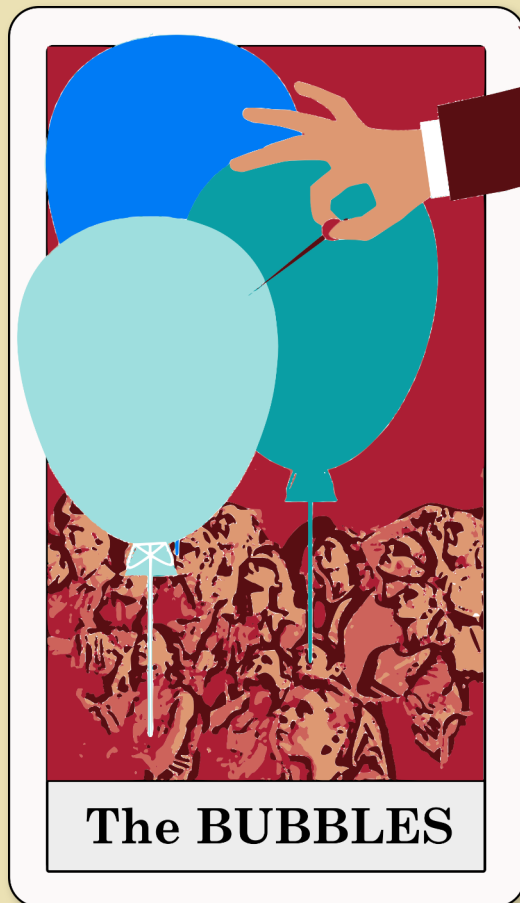
The RIFT

to the streets. We are on the verge of bigger uprisings that can win much more than what Roe v. Wade protected.

The far right and Republican Party have declared war on the bodily autonomy of women and trans people.

New laws put transgender people at risk of misdemeanor charges just for existing in public.

Although Republicans have been attacking trans people for decades, this year is on track to be the worst. Tennessee has passed legislation that will ban drag shows in public or where they can be viewed by minors. This not only targets drag queen story hours, but also could put transgender people who are engaged in any kind of performance at risk of misdemeanor charges just for existing in public. 15 other states are considering similar legislation.



2023 DSA NATIONAL CONVENTION



The DECISION

Trans healthcare is also being targeted across the country, and the situation is particularly dire for youth. This year 21 states are considering or have already passed measures that would impose civil penalties for parents and providers who provide gender-affirming care to minors, and bills in 11 states would criminalize it. This is particularly shocking since, according to the Movement Advancement Project, “prior to 2020, not a single state had introduced legislation to ban this medical care.”

Even adult care is being targeted in several states, including Tennessee, where a new bill would prevent TennCare (Medicaid) from entering contracts with companies that provide gender-affirming medical care for trans people. Bills like this reveal the conservative lie that this wave of legislation is about “protecting children” rather than attempting to legislate transgender people out of existence.

In addition to anti-trans legislation, there has been a flood of restrictions on abortion since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* last summer. Currently, abortion is outright banned in 13 states and severely restricted in many more. With the

overall lull in social movements, we haven’t yet seen anything close to a full-blown mobilization against the Supreme Court’s ruling or the slew of anti-abortion legislation being passed around the country. There have been protests of course – some of them quite large – but there’s been no escalation.

This is due in part to the failures of the big women’s organizations such as Planned Parenthood and NARAL to take a struggle-based approach. These organizations have prioritized fundraising and electing Democrats, who were in power when the anti-abortion *Dobbs* ruling came down and did nothing to stop it. A successful strategy would mean an escalating wave of protests organized around bold demands, including for Congress to codify abortion rights nationally. Such a movement would benefit enormously from bringing in organized labor.

DSA should be publicly calling on the large feminist organizations to adopt this strategy, seeking to do joint work wherever possible, while still criticizing their approach when warranted. However, despite doing good work on abortion in many local chapters, DSA has yet to adopt a nation-wide strategy for winning abortion and other rights relating to bodily autonomy and parenthood. DSA has the power to play a critical role in the formation and leadership of a new feminist movement, helping to take anger over abortion and attacks on trans people to the streets.

Trans people, women, and youth won’t accept the status quo much longer. The lack of leadership is a major obstacle, but as we’ve seen with the uprisings for abortion rights in Ireland and Argentina as well as the burgeoning youth movement for queer liberation and bodily autonomy, rage at the far-right attacks on our bodies will lead to explosive mass movements capable of winning much more than abortion legality. After all, it was a mass movement that won *Roe* in the first place.

Electoral Blues

Prediction: Biden is unlikely to get anything done for working people, giving Trump a second chance at the White House. It’s time for socialists to take concrete steps to win independence from the Democrats.

Biden is vanishingly unlikely to get anything done that will help regular people. During the COVID crisis, he was able to pass short-term policies such as the child tax credit that put money in the hands of working people. Since they were passed however, the government has been systematically rolling back these programs. Now the Democrats and Republicans are conspiring to kick up to 15 million people off their healthcare under “Medicaid unwinding.”

The Labor Upsurge: The Challenges Ahead

Prediction: There’s a Long Road Ahead to Rebuild Labor. However, a New Developing Generation of Labor Militants Will Shake Up Workplace Relations – and Labor Itself.

The past couple years have seemed like a new era for labor in America. The success of the Amazon Labor Union drive in Staten Island sent shock waves through the labor movement. The organizers overcame massive obstacles and opposition from the company to win their independent union.

Fueled by the brutal working conditions during the pandemic, the Starbucks unionization wave has swept the country with remarkable speed. 278 stores representing over 6,500 workers are in Starbucks Workers United. It’s not just Starbucks workers who are seeking to unionize: there are drives at Trader Joe’s, Chipotle, Apple Stores, Google, and more. There’s been an uptick in strikes and union organizing: in 2022, there were 1,249 union elections, up almost 50 percent from 2021, and workers won 72 percent of those elections. UPS might strike this summer, and the United Auto Workers has elected a new, combative president.

However, despite these major developments and militant mood, labor in the US is not in good shape from a historical perspective. The unionization rate was 10.1 percent in 2022, which was actually down from 10.3 percent in 2021, and well lower than in the 1980s when it was over 20 percent. Also, the wave of union victories doesn’t mean these workers are actually getting contracts: for example, the Starbucks union has yet to get a contract for their workers and hasn’t been as combative as necessary to force Starbucks to make concessions.

Caveats aside, there’s been a real upsurge in organizing, strike action, and public support for unions coming out of the pandemic. But this insurgent labor movement needs to be nourished and given a fighting strategy. It is a chance to start to revive the labor movement, and DSA can play an active role in that process – but how?

Socialists should promote in their unions and unionizing efforts the essence of Kim Moody’s rank-and-file strategy, which includes reckoning with business unionism and labor liberalism. The failed strategies of too many labor leaders of either cosying up with bosses or turning our unions into Democratic Party-aligned NGOs has failed, discredited labor, and is a

millstone around our neck in new unionizing efforts.

Socialists want to build unions and a lively labor movement with all workers without pre-condition, including those with different views. However, socialists offer a unique contribution that is not limited by adjusting the union’s effort to what capitalism or an individual boss believes is possible. Our vision of an economy run democratically, not by and for billionaires, is an empowering tool for labor. Organizing within the labor movement – including in reform caucuses – to steer the political orientation of our unions against business unionism and labor liberalism can help show a new layer of combative workers a way forward. Socialists in the labor movement must consistently argue against the bureaucratic, corrupt approach that dominates labor and fight for union democracy and political independence of the workers’ movement. ■



The SEEDS

The Biden administration wasn't able to pass lasting legislation in the form of Build Back Better (BBB), instead settling for the immensely watered down Inflation Reduction Act. Biden's new budget contains social welfare spending and taxes on the wealthy, but if two Democrat-controlled chambers couldn't pass BBB, the new budget is dead in the water with a Republican House.

If Biden and the Democrats were to put forward sufficiently inspiring proposals and organize working-class people to demand Republicans fall in line, this would broaden the horizons of what is possible even with a divided Congress. Of course, the Democrats won't do this, but that doesn't completely rule out new mass movements arising to force change on a variety of issues. Unfortunately, DSA members in Congress don't promote an independent strategy. Therefore, the most likely scenario for Biden's presidency is a continuation of the status quo and an increasingly dissatisfied public.

While still not certain, 2024 is shaping up to be the rematch no one wanted: Trump vs. Biden. On the Republican side, there's a lot of wishful thinking on the part of certain segments of ruling-class Republicans that Trump could lose to Ron DeSantis, who puts a more composed, sane face on the same far-right policies. But this is still Trump's race to lose. In some ways, Trump is posturing on the left, claiming to want to protect Medicare and Social Security and saying he would "easily" prevent World War III with Russia over Ukraine. This will increase his appeal to working-class people disappointed with the direction of the country. Additionally, his indictment and arrest has only given him a surge in Republican primary polls, though it's yet to be seen if it will help him or hurt him in a general election.

On the Democratic side, just 37 percent of Democrats want Biden to run again, but so far only long-shot Marianne Williamson has thrown her hat into the Democratic primaries. It's unlikely there will be a Democratic candidate DSA and the left can mobilize around, since Bernie has said he won't run against Biden. Again, our DSA electeds aren't posing a political alternative: while saying that she will closely watch the presidential primary as it unfolds, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez told CNN last month she "would enthusiastically support [Biden] if he were the Democratic nominee."

In 2020, there was a huge sense of relief when Trump was defeated, but now the far-right threat looms again, and, while not inevitable, a flailing economy and a lame duck Biden presidency opens the door for a Trump victory. We desperately need a new, independent left alternative to break free of this

cycle where Democratic failures repeatedly empower the Republicans and far right.

What of the Left?

Prediction: DSA is in crisis and will continue to struggle to find its way for now, but radicalization continues and a new layer of activists – in DSA and in labor – is being trained to lead. Marxists have a huge opportunity to organize and galvanize a new core of activists.

In this messy situation, DSA is struggling to find its footing. This is in part due to the lull in social movements. However, while we can't replace organic mass movements, we could be more of a factor in building them with centralized, bold campaigns. Another element is that there's a Democratic president in the White House who was able to deliver some wins for regular people during the first part of his presidency.

DSA hasn't yet been able to provide a viable alternative to the Democratic Party. Instead of being a major pole of attraction for workers and youth disenchanted with Biden, DSA is losing members, has low participation in many chapters, and a dysfunctional national leadership that's proven itself incapable of working together or holding DSA electeds accountable.

Clearly, the left and our organization are struggling. A few years ago, it was easy to look through Bernie-colored glasses at the explosive growth of DSA and the broader radicalization happening in society and feel like anything was possible. But there was never going to be a straight line of growth to a mass workers' party capable of achieving socialist revolution.

On the other hand, while we have nowhere near the mass socialist and workers parties that were present in many countries in the early 20th century, we are also much better off than we were any other time post-Cold War.

The Occupy movement, the Red Wave teachers' strikes, the BLM movement: these have all trained a layer of activists who can take on future struggles. For example, many of the Starbucks workers behind the union drive cut their teeth on Bernie campaigns. There's a new politicized layer of society that simply didn't exist a few decades ago. The growth of DSA is the sharpest example of this, but it is also manifested in the revival of the labor movement. And while some activists are burning out or losing faith in the power of protest to achieve change, many more are waiting to be activated by the right struggle or campaign.

There have also been some important victories, particularly in labor. Although a recession and

higher unemployment could take away some of the economic power workers have been using in recent battles, declining living standards will continue forcing workers into action. Workers got a self-esteem boost and increased expectations from concessions during COVID years. Even if a recession would slow down short-term organizing efforts, a new layer of militant labor activists is developing.

Additionally, while *socialist* organizers in many places might be struggling, *socialism* remains resurgent. How else can we explain the increase in DSA electeds on the local and national levels when our organization as a whole is stagnating? The same conditions that created previous movements are still there and in many cases are getting worse. Climate change, racism, economic inequality: all of these issues have the potential to inspire movements that can shake the foundations of society. Although it's impossible to predict the timing, explosive struggles are inevitable. But this time, there's a new generation ready to step in and lead. Let that thought buoy you through these difficult times.

Looking to the Future: Three Things We Can Do

1) Promote a Clear Alternative: A Socialist Rupture with Capitalism

Democratic socialists need to advocate for a clear vision of a different society – one based on democratic decisions over our lives, the economy, and the environment, as well as economic, racial, and gender justice. The different wings of the ruling class have proven themselves utterly incapable of freeing us from the economic and climate crises, and Wall Street liberalism is only driving people to search for far-right alternatives. Despite the lull in social movements, now is the time to boldly build support for fundamental change and a socialist world.

2) Relentlessly Pursue Political Independence

One of the main problems in DSA is the lack of independence from the Democratic Party. This spans from the behavior of our most prominent representatives in Congress to the way we present ourselves at most levels of our work. We need the ability to stand up to the Democratic Party machine, back up representatives who want to fight, and hold others accountable when they fall short. The discussions leading up to the DSA National Convention in Chicago this August 4 to 6 will be key to building support for a course change. You can find our resolutions, discussions, and more at ReformAndRevolution.org.



3) Build a Marxist Backbone Within DSA and the Labor Movement

While Marxists fight to build the broader forces of the socialist and labor movement, we also want to put forward a fighting, effective program within those movements, and that means being organized. In unions and workplaces, that could mean joining or forming reform caucuses or convincing your coworkers to join DSA and holding meetings on socialist strategy. Within DSA, that means engaging in open, comradely debate and pursuing initiatives to make DSA more democratic, independent, and powerful. Reform & Revolution is fighting to build the forces of Marxism to help win victories for the socialist and workers' movement in the short-term, as well as prepare the forces for a socialist transformation of society. If you agree, join us. ■

Rosemary Dodd is a food service worker and a member of DSA's Reform & Revolution caucus; she was a member of the Steering Committee of DSA in Portland, Oregon, and now lives in Asheville, North Carolina.

Staff-Driven Socialists of America?



STATEMENT BY REFORM & REVOLUTION

WWW.REFORMANDREVOLUTION.ORG

DSA Needs an Electoral Director Who Supports Class-Struggle Elections and Works to Overcome the Dirty Stay.

DSA's elected national leadership, the National Political Committee (NPC), has arrived at an impasse which might last until the DSA National Convention in August.

The membership of DSA got a glimpse of this stalemate on January 17, when it was reported that the vote for hiring an Electoral Director was blocked by 9 of the 17 NPC members (including the two YDSA representatives, who have only half votes) refusing to cast a vote, thus denying quorum.

These nine NPC members, who constitute the left-wing of the NPC, published an oppositional statement explaining their decision:

We believe that the Electoral Director should align with [the] vision of building an independent socialist electoral project and show an understanding of the limits of coalition with even the most progressive wings of the Democratic Party. Before voting for such a candidate, we must be given the opportunity to have a full political discussion regarding this position, the candidates who applied, and how all of this relates to our electoral strategy.

We also have concerns about this hiring process. The majority of the Personnel Committee – a group of some National Political Committee (NPC) members, senior staff, and appointed members that oversees hiring and other staff concerns – put forward this candidate for the NPC to vote on and insisted they were the most qualified. However, we were prevented from considering alternative candidates who may better align politically with a broader section of the NPC and who also have the experience necessary for the Electoral Director position. During any hiring process, only the Operations Director sees all

the applications and decides which ones the Personnel Committee and ultimately the NPC considers. When an NPC member on the Personnel Committee asked staff to share all applicants with the full NPC, the majority on this committee refused.

The Reform & Revolution caucus agrees with these comrades that DSA staff are political actors. In a political organization like DSA there is no avoiding that staff will play a political role. The key is to select staff democratically and transparently, and to make sure they serve the democratic will of the majority of the organization.

Despite the formal pretense that DSA staff are non-political, the current reality is that key staff leaders (starting with the National Director Maria Svart) are aligned with the moderate wing of our organization (represented by the Socialist Majority Caucus and the Green New Deal slate on the NPC). And this wing, including their staff supporters, promotes a specific political vision for DSA: one which keeps us closer to the Democratic Party, turns DSA more into a NGO-style organization, and limits membership influence.

This wing had a majority of the NPC until a recent resignation from the NPC by one of its supporters. Now the NPC is deadlocked. There are eight votes for the DSA moderates around Socialist Majority and the Green New Deal slate and eight votes for the left wing (seven full NPC members and two half votes for the representatives of YDSA, composed of members of Bread & Roses and Emerge, as well as independents).

The deadlock in our leadership body will not help to overcome the current challenges to DSA. Even before this, however, the NPC had not accomplished much. The former NPC majority stood out for its unwillingness to hold elected socialists accountable to representing DSA. There has been a deafening silence in the absence of initiatives that



could have moved the largest socialist organization in the US into meaningful action. DSA's membership decreased by around 15 percent (see NPC member Jenbo's Tweet, November 4, 2022) and the level of activity is low compared to previous years.

Despite a marked increase in DSA-endorsed elected officeholders, without a clear strategy to use these positions to promote socialist policies and build DSA as an alternative to the Democratic Party, these electoral successes on their own will be shallow and ineffective at building the socialist movement.

The open deadlock on the NPC also marks the beginning of DSA's pre-convention period. The biannual DSA National Convention is the organization's highest democratic decision-making body, and is where a new NPC will be elected. Chapters will elect delegates who will come together from August 4 to 6 in Chicago.

After two years of stagnation and underperformance by DSA, the membership will have the opportunity to make a course correction. To succeed, they will need to grapple with and overcome the lack of an understanding of the current political situation since Biden took office – a period which has seen a decline in social struggles and protests and reduce activity in DSA. The key to overcoming these challenges lies in revitalizing democratic life in DSA and empowering our members to assess the current political moment, and develop a new course of action where DSA can have a more effective intervention in the class struggle and social movements.

Accountability Starts in Our Own Organization

The list of frustrations about DSA's elected officials – and about the response from DSA's leadership – is long. At the top are the lack of any significant

consequences for DSA Congressman Jamaal Bowman after voting for \$1 billion in military aid for Israel's racist regime, the lack of any serious consequences over the vote of three of the four DSA Congress members to take away the right of the railway workers to strike, and the votes of three of the four Congress members to accept Biden's 2023 federal budget, which increased military spending above inflation while spending for everything else fell in real terms.

The NPC majority did not develop any kind of process to hold electeds accountable and ensure they effectively represent DSA. DSA is currently stuck between two disempowering options – accept whatever elected officials do, or make sterile calls for expulsion. Leadership did not empower members to make their voices heard, to draw red lines, and to politically counter the pressures on our elected officials by the Democratic Party and the liberal mass media.

These failures in political leadership by the NPC are rooted in real weaknesses within DSA itself in terms of political understanding, active engagement, and democratic control over the organization's national leadership. In this context, the priority for national leadership should be to use each debate and crisis in DSA as an opportunity to raise the political level and active participation of members in running our organization. That is why Reform & Revolution has called at various stages for the NPC to organize national town halls to discuss various challenges and controversies with members, as well as a national activist conference (a non-voting national conference, as called for in the DSA national constitution) in the summer of 2022.

In crisis? Empower the members! That needs to be the mantra of the leadership of a democratic organization. Unfortunately, most of DSA's leadership (especially Socialist Majority Caucus and the Green New Deal slate, but also at times Bread & Roses) has

jenbo ✨ 🇺🇸 @iroc... · 04 Nov 22
 I'm continuing to see arguments that "things are fine" in DSA to support throwing an exorbitant amount of member dues at a bad grievance process. This happy-talk is based on a picture that the org is soldiering on while in reality we've lost 12k members since this NPC was seated.

jenbo ✨ 🇺🇸 @irockgnomes
 In Aug 2021, we had ~94,687 total members, 77,177 (81%) of which were in good standing. We are now at ~86,997 total members, 64,672 (74%) of which are in good standing.

That's a loss of 12k members (~15% of the org) and the gulf between good-standing & total members is widening.

12:43 · 04 Nov 22

20 Retweets 9 Quote Tweets

206 Likes

opposed such a conception. Calls for a serious political debate and reflection at the time of the Bowman crisis were brushed aside with pragmatic appeals to not turn inward and instead focus on getting on with campaigning work.

Unfortunately, it was entirely predictable that without a political course correction DSA would continue to see a decline in active membership, face new crises, and see its campaigning work suffer. Now, a year and a half later, the balance sheet is clear.

Concrete Proposals to Overcome the Crisis of Accountability of the NPC and the Staff

Here are some concrete proposals DSA should discuss and vote on at the next Convention to address the democratic shortcomings that the experience of the last period has revealed:

» **Vacancies on the NPC should be filled by a democratic vote** of the membership of DSA. Reform & Revolution supported a constitutional amendment at the last Convention that proposed this, but it was unfortunately not adopted. In light of the experience since the 2021 Convention, the upcoming Convention should reconsider. This amendment also would have added an important democratic check for members to be able to control the NPC – **the right to recall NPC members**. Democracy includes allowing the membership to be able to recall and remove leaders it no longer supports. This would have been a valuable tool to use when the majority of NPC members resisted efforts to correct Bowman's (and AOC's) unprincipled vote on providing military aid to the Israeli state. (Changing the amendment to raise the minimum threshold to trigger a recall election would be worth considering).

» **Empower the NPC to be able to lead DSA and to direct the work of national staff**. The last convention took an important step forward by agreeing to pay stipends to the five NPC Steering Committee members. This should be expanded to the whole NPC, so all of its members are able to do the work of leading the organization and overseeing staff.

» **We need a National Director who is accountable to the NPC** and does not withhold information from the NPC and the membership. We don't need more Non-Disclosure Agreements signed by NPC members; what we need is dramatically more transparency from the staff to the NPC, and from the NPC to the membership. That the NPC did not even get to see a full list of applicants for the Electoral Director position highlights these deficiencies. We appreciate the

hard work and dedication of Maria Svart over many years, including developing a national staff of over 32 comrades working for us. However, the key task of a National Director needs to be to hold the staff accountable to the elected leadership. Unfortunately, this has not been happening. It is time for a change in the position of the National Director.

» **We need a biannual National DSA Conference** (in alternating years between the biannual Conventions) also known in the DSA constitution as a "National Activist Conference." Such a conference exists in the constitution as a means of increasing membership democracy; to ignore it stunts participation and education.

Breaking Free from the Dirty Stay

It's no accident that the most visible recent conflict on the NPC centered around DSA's electoral work. Formally, almost everybody in DSA is for working-class power and the aim of building toward a working-class party. In reality, DSA's electeds have increasingly worked as a loyal opposition to the Democratic Party rather than offering a militant socialist opposition visible to the broad public. DSA electeds have played down their socialist branding, largely promoting a radical version of progressive or populist politics instead of socialist demands, and are not systematically using their positions to encourage supporters to join DSA and prioritize building movements from below over insider legislative tactics.

The lack of accountability of our electeds, the pressures they come under every day in the halls of power, the pressure of the mass media and the class-collaborationist union and progressive leaders – all of these is treated like hiccups within an otherwise well-



What's the role of socialists in a railroad strike? In 1877, the young Eugene V. Debs gave his answer by leading railroad workers in a work stoppage.

Blockading of engines at Martinsburg, West Virginia, during the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, illustration by Fred B. Schell, Harper's Weekly, August 11, 1877. Prints and Photographs Division/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

functioning system. Opponents of increased accountability have typically been willing to admit that individual electeds have certain weaknesses, and that workers and DSA lack sufficient power - but they have denied the existence of a more systematic accountability problem. Instead the argument has been – especially around the DSA Convention 2021 – to maintain the status quo: It has worked so well to gain positions while running on the Democratic Party ballot line, so what's the problem?

This untenable state, where the political position of our organization is completely contradicted by our actual electoral practice, has come to be known as the "dirty stay."

Following the example of the 1-2-3-4 resolution in New York City, we need an alliance of comrades in DSA in favor of a break with the Democratic Party (dirty or clean) and of comrades aiming in a meaningful way to build a "party surrogate" to put forward

concrete proposals to overcome the current situation of a dirty stay. The 1-2-3-4 proposal did not win a majority in New York City, with all but one of the numerous elected officials in New York opposed to it. However, it started a necessary discussion on how to enact a different policy of holding elected officials accountable and set clear expectations for their work, as well as an outline of how to use class struggle elections to promote democratic socialism and DSA even where comrades run on the Democratic Party ballot line.

Concrete Proposals on Electoral Strategy and Hiring an Electoral Director

Given our NPC's lack of accountability and the fact that they may not even fill the open vacancy on the NPC anytime soon, DSA members don't have much direct power to push for an immediate course change. However, we can use the months ahead of the

Convention in August to develop resolutions that we can vote on there, and to organize a full discussion among all active DSA members in preparation for the Convention and delegate elections. In the meantime, these steps should be taken:

» No hiring of an Electoral Director before the Convention; we expect the left wing of the NPC to hold strong for a democratic process.

» Pass a 1-2-3-4 style resolution to work to overcome the "dirty stay" situation as a basis for our coming electoral work and the work of a future Electoral Director.

The Reform & Revolution caucus is trying to bring comrades together to develop such resolutions and offer a Marxist alternative to the course of the previous NPC majority. Please visit our website, **ReformAndRevolution.org**, to find out more where we are at in this process. ■

A Socialist Response to Imperialism and the War in Ukraine



A RESOLUTION FOR THE DSA NATIONAL CONVENTION IN AUGUST
SUPPORTED BY MARXIST UNITY GROUP AND REFORM & REVOLUTION

DSA and its Elected Officials Can't Leave it to Trump and Other Republicans to Claim that They are the Anti-War Alternative to Biden.

The start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 20, 2022 marked a significant change in world relations. It also began a year of suffering for the people in the region, a refugee crisis, and huge implications for food and energy supplies globally.

Capitalist commentators previously believed that in today's world, wars would be limited to the countries of the Global South, so this outbreak of battle in Europe came as a shock to them. The conflict revealed a new level of inter-imperialist rivalry.

On one hand, the Western powers were mobilized and regrouped through an enlarged and empowered NATO under newly cemented US leadership. Sweden is about to join NATO, and Finland has just done so. All attempts by German imperialism to use the Russian energy supply to win more independence from its US ally got crushed as soon as it became clear that this war would not be over within a few days.

On the other hand, it quickly became clear that Putin's aspirations, based on a once powerful but now aging military, mired in corruption and limited by the low morale of its troops, would not succeed as intended. Russian capitalism, built on energy exports, is not strong enough to seriously compete with US and other Western imperialist powers in a high tech war.

Meanwhile, there is an ongoing stalemate on the battlefield that both sides aim to overcome with a spring offensive. If the outcome of the war is left to

the battlefield and the exhaustion of the troops on both sides, there is no quick victory nor end to this war in sight.

A global anti-imperialist and anti-war movement is needed to change the course of action in both the Western camp and Russia.

A Divided Left

However, the left globally – including the Marxist left – is deeply divided over this war.

A very small minority of the left in the Western countries has taken a pro-Russian position in order to stand against the US-led Western camp.

A larger part looks at the conflict solely through the lens of the struggle of the Ukrainian people for self-determination. Unfortunately, a number of groups and comrades with this position now support the decades old but now increasingly direct intervention of US and other Western imperialists. This approach strengthens the pro-Western Zelenskyy government that uses its military authority (backed by high-tech Western weapons) to continue the repression of the Russian-speaking minority, their media, and their right of self-determination as well as democratic and workers' rights in the Ukraine.

A third group – which Reform & Revolution counts itself among – does not deny the right of Ukrainian working-class people to democratically decide their rights including the right of national self-determination and the right to live without occupation and war. We demand the withdrawal of all Russian troops. However, even before the war began, this conflict saw a huge clash of great powers at play. In 2014, Ukraine changed from being part of the Russian sphere of influence to an appendix of Western powers. One wing of the corrupt, capitalist ruling elites was

replaced by another group with a different strategic outlook. This was part of an aggressive expansion of economic, geostrategic, and military expansion of Western powers. In fact, despite all its promises not to do so, NATO has expanded 500 miles closer to the Russian border since 1991 and has held aggressive military maneuvers directly at its border.

Today, the dominant feature of the Ukraine war is the involvement of a whole range of powers, from China to the US, from Iran to the EU. This is a hot war in the middle of a world enmeshed in a new Cold War. This is a proxy war fought on the backs of the Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking people in the region with atrocities endured by ordinary people and soldiers.

DSA Needs to Step Up

As outlined in the resolution below, immediately after the start of the Russian invasion, DSA took a good position, condemning the invasion while also opposing NATO's military aid and involvement. However, DSA's elected officials – especially its most prominent members in Congress – have not taken any critical stance toward the Biden administration's Ukraine policy. Quite the contrary, they supported military budgets, military aid in the billions for the Zelenskyy government, the expansion of NATO, and more money for the funding of the Pentagon.

This is why Reform & Revolution met with comrades from the Marxist Unity Group and developed a proposal for DSA's National Convention, the highest decision-making body of DSA, putting forward a pro-international working class and anti-NATO, anti-imperialist perspective. The Convention is planned for August 4 to 6, 2023 in Chicago. In the run-up to the Convention we plan – together with others – to organize different discussions including on the

question of militarism, imperialism, and the Ukraine war.

If you want to get involved and invited to these discussions, please sign up to our newsletter at ReformAndRevolution.org.

Here is the resolution we've submitted to the DSA Convention:

Socialist Anti-Militarism and the War in Ukraine

By the Marxist Unity Group and Reform & Revolution



reform & revolution

WHEREAS

The war in Ukraine has taken a horrendous toll, with millions of Ukrainian civilians displaced, and tens of thousands of Ukrainians and Russians killed or injured. It also raises the risk of a nuclear conflict.

Following Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, DSA correctly condemned it and called for the total withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine. Russia's 2022 invasion was a dramatic escalation of an existing conflict that had erupted into violence in 2014 between the forces of US-led Western imperialism and Russia.

The present US global strategy is premised on trying to maintain its position as the world imperialist hegemon. NATO has expanded about 500 miles eastward after promising not to, and it has provocatively conducted massive war games near Russia's border.

The US has supplied tens of billions of dollars in military aid to the Ukrainian army and far-right

Those at the top say: Peace and war

Are of different substance.

But their peace and their war

Are like wind and storm.

War grows from their peace

Like son from his mother

He bears

Her frightful features.

Their war kills

Whatever their peace

Has left over.

From: A German War Primer

by Bertolt Brecht

paramilitaries and has directly provided intelligence, training, and advisers to the Ukrainian forces, effectively making itself a party to the war.

The US possesses by far the largest and most destructive military machine in the world. It supports the right-wing Israeli regime in its occupation and displacement of Palestinians. To facilitate Sweden and Finland joining NATO, the Western powers accept Turkey's brutal suppression of its Kurdish minority and its airstrikes against Kurdish people in Syria, denying Kurdish people their democratic right to self-determination.

The United States' war economy and military-industrial complex are closely tied to police oppression of the working class and communities of color. The US military transferred \$7.6 billion in equipment to US law enforcement over the past 30 years.

The pro-NATO Zelenskyy government is strengthened by the US support and uses that strength to stifle democratic rights in Ukraine, to weaken workers' rights including rights of collective bargaining, and to further crack down on the Russian minority in Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine has significantly contributed to skyrocketing food and energy prices globally, a disaster for the poor especially in the global South.

Socialists have to stand against the agenda of US imperialism, against the existence of NATO, and in favor of closing all US military bases abroad, bringing home all troops. Socialists stand for the right of self-determination of both the Ukrainian nation and the Russian speakers of the Donbas and Crimea, while defending minority rights in all regions. As socialists, we stand against the presence of Russian troops, and support those in the Russian Left who are fighting against Putin's war and his right-wing, Russian nationalist, and pro-capitalist agenda.

DSA members in Congress have offered no serious criticism of the policy of the Biden administration in this conflict. Instead they have violated core socialist principles by voting in favor of every standalone authorization of military aid to the Ukrainian government, which serves to promote US imperialism's aims in the conflict. They have also voted to expand the imperialist NATO military alliance.

BE IT RESOLVED

① DSA stands at the forefront of the efforts to build a movement against war and militarism and reaffirms its calls for US withdrawal from NATO, the abolition of NATO, closing all US foreign mili-

tary bases, and bringing home all US troops abroad (including the 100,000 US troops deployed to Europe). It calls on local chapters to join the work of the International Committee in building mass anti-imperialist consciousness and protests.

② DSA calls on its members elected to public office:

a) To reject any budget that allows the Pentagon to maintain its global war machine and includes military aid to US client-states such as Ukraine and the apartheid state of Israel

b) To vote against US weapons and military aid to the pro-NATO, pro-capitalist, undemocratic, and corrupt Ukrainian government.

c) To organize solidarity with the Russian anti-war movement, stand against the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine, and for the right of self-determination of both the Ukrainian nation and the Russian speakers, as well as for minority rights in all of the regions;

d) To fight for a US withdrawal from NATO, closing US foreign military bases, and bringing home all US troops abroad.

③ Failure to carry out these policies should be regarded as a breach of DSA's principles and anti-imperialist policy. DSA's membership, elected leadership, and elected socialist caucuses and socialists in office committees at the national, state, and chapter levels will be responsible for appropriately holding their representatives democratically accountable to this political commitment. As a first step, the new National Political Committee (NPC) will prioritize opening up a discussion with DSA Congressmembers about adopting the position in this resolution. If agreement cannot be reached, the NPC will organize a town hall, inviting all DSA Congressmembers, for DSA to explain its policy and DSA members to hear the responses of our Congressmembers.

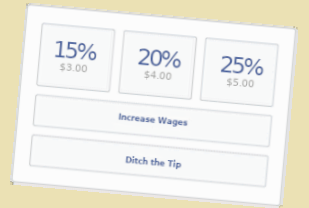
④ The NPC and International Committee will organize an anti-war conference, cohering leftist parties, labor unions, social movements, and other anti-war forces from across the world. The conference should discuss concrete actions to begin building a mass peace movement in the US. It should also build solidarity with left-wing, anti-imperialist forces in Ukraine and the Russian anti-war movement, and highlight anti-NATO voices internationally. The NPC will invite and urge DSA's elected members of Congress to publicize and attend this conference. ■

Ditch the Tip



BY SEAN CASE

✉ SEAN.MATTHEW.CASE@GMAIL.COM



Tippling enables racist and sexist behavior and fuels poverty. Let's get rid of it.

You've just finished your meal at a restaurant. The food was great, but the service wasn't. Your distracted server took a while to get to your table and forgot to refill your water. You leave a tip, but only 5 percent. You're sending a message, right? "Do better next time and you'll be rewarded." What your server is thinking is, "What an asshole," before moving to the next table and immediately forgetting about you.

There's a popular notion that tipping is the financial marker of some kind of social contract. A generous tip shows gratitude for stellar service. A stiff lets the tipped worker know they need to step up their game. Any service industry veteran can tell you this is bullshit.

Poverty by Design

The origins of tipping in the US begin to erode the facade of tipping's civility. In the wake of the abolition of slavery in the South, tipping was used as a way for racist employers to avoid paying a wage to the many Black workers who found employment in low-paying service jobs. Instead, workers were forced to rely on the "generosity" of the customer. (A federal minimum wage wouldn't be introduced in the US until the 1930s).

Today, tipped workers experience poverty at more than twice the rate of non-tipped workers. The federal minimum wage for tipped workers (\$2.13 per hour) hasn't been raised since 1991. While it used to be tied to the federal non-tipped minimum (\$7.25 per hour) and was required to be at least 50 percent of that wage, the two were decoupled in 1996 by Democratic president Bill Clinton at the insistence of the National Restaurant Association (NRA), a powerful lobbying group representing

food industry bosses. Though 30 states offer higher minimum wages than the federal minimum, only eight of those states have done away with a sub-minimum wage for tipped workers.

In theory, employers are legally obligated to ensure that their tipped workers are making at least the non-tipped minimum after tips are accounted for. In reality, tipped workers are routinely paid below that threshold. Laws mandating that workers' take-home pay meet the non-tipped minimum are difficult to enforce in such an atomized industry. The enforcement that does happen is telling: over 80 percent of restaurants investigated for failure to fully pay tipped workers were found to have committed a wage or hour violation of some kind. Those violations often involve employers mishandling tips earned by their workers.

When your livelihood depends on tips, you're left with a choice: stick up for yourself or put on a smile and endure degradation in the hopes of making rent.

In practice, it's generally up to workers themselves to monitor whether or not they're being paid correctly. If they find they aren't, they must weigh the costs of confronting their boss and fighting for their full wage, a move that can leave them open to firing and other forms of retaliation. This is especially daunting for undocumented workers, who are disproportionately represented among the ranks of the service industry.

Economic degradation isn't the only effect of a two-tiered wage system. Tipped work is also a breeding ground for racist and sexist attitudes and behavior. 40 percent of tipped workers are people of color. Women make up two-thirds of the tipped workforce. Data

show that workers of color – especially Black workers – in the service industry are tipped less than their white counterparts. Over 75 percent of tipped workers report experiencing some form of sexual harassment on the job – by far the highest of any industry.

This isn't incidental. When your livelihood depends on tips, you're left with a choice: stick up for yourself or put on a smile and endure degradation in the hopes of making rent that month.

Good for the Boss, Bad for the Worker

The two-tiered wage system is a boon to restaurant owners, particularly owners of large restaurant groups and chains. Pay your workers starvation wages and have the public (barely) subsidize the rest? What a dream! Rather than producing anger at the boss for not paying them more, tipping often leads restaurant workers to misdirect their anger toward customers instead. As the cost of living rises, so does tension between the tipped worker and the customer, as fundamentally the worker is relying on the customer to pay a substantial portion of their wage. Meanwhile, the boss keeps paying the same low hourly rate. It's no wonder that the NRA spends upwards of \$3 million a year on lobbying and campaign contributions to keep such practices in place.

A common objection to doing away with the sub-minimum wage is that the system actually works for some service industry workers. In particular, people tend to point to servers and bartenders in high-end restaurants and urban centers. Indeed, people in those positions do well for themselves compared to others in the industry. But the relative benefit those workers receive is financially overstated and undercut by the emotional and physical exhaustion of their position. Servers often jockey for the busiest (and most difficult) shifts knowing that they'll take home more tips at the end of the day. They'll put up with rudeness and harassment from customers and unreasonable requests from management to maintain their position.

Of course, servers in high-end restaurants are a small minority of tipped workers. But the above argument does highlight a major problem in the restaurant industry, one which is often exploited by industry groups: the front-of-house back-of-house divide. While front-of-house workers like servers generally receive the lowest hourly wage in their workplaces, they often wind up taking home more money at the end of the day than their back-of-house coworkers. This dynamic frequently undermines solidarity among restaurant workers by seeding resentment among cooks and dishwashers toward their front-of-house coworkers.

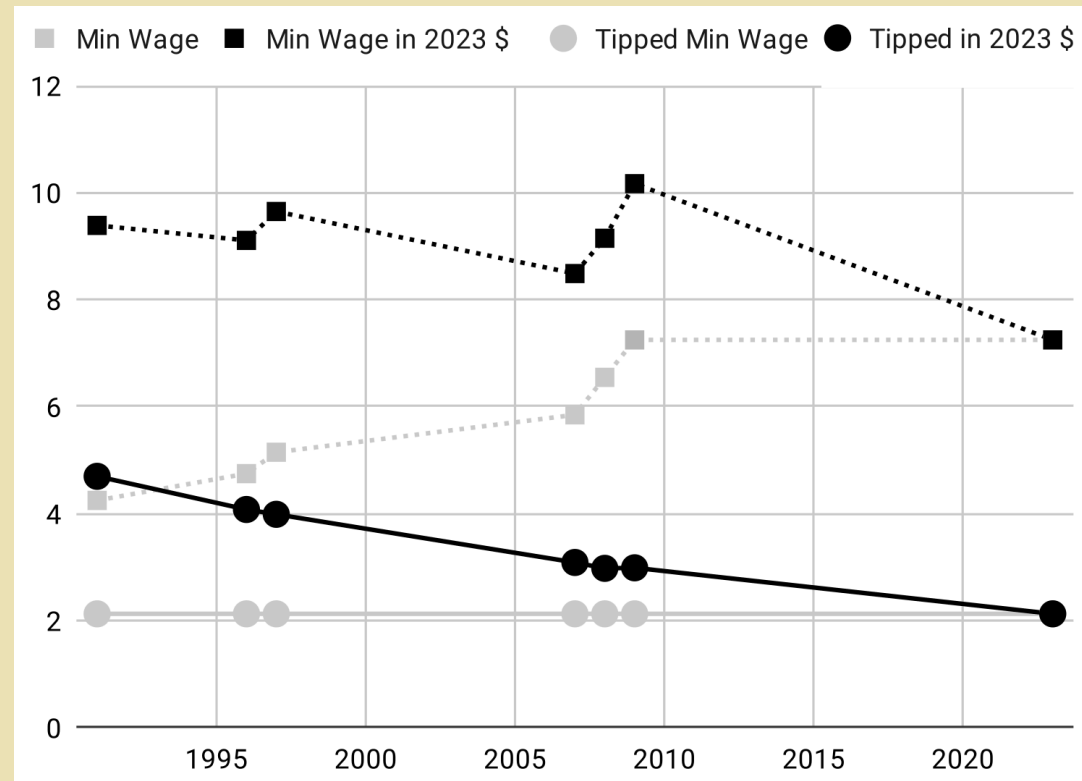


Illustration based on Pixabay graphic

Fight Back to Ax the Sub-Minimum Wage

But what all service industry workers have in common (tipped or non-tipped) binds them together. Chaotic scheduling; grueling pacing; a lack of healthcare or paid time off; and wage theft are all endemic across the industry. Because of these conditions, burnout, injury, and substance abuse are common among restaurant workers.

Tipped workers (and service industry workers in general) need to fight back to bring an end to the sub-minimum wage and sweep tipping into the dustbin of history. Some progressive groups focused on the service industry are doing admirable work to bring more attention to the plight of tipped workers and fight for legislative changes. Restaurant Opportunities Centers United's Restaurant Workers Bill of Rights campaign offers a useful framework for what to fight for – better wages, paid leave, consistent scheduling, improved workplace safety, and universal healthcare. One Fair Wage pushes for the elimination of the sub-minimum wage in favor of a flat living wage for all working people, regardless of whether they may receive tips.

But work by non-profit advocacy groups is at best slow and at worst a dead end. Workers themselves need to

lead the charge for change. That begins with organizing with their coworkers. By banding together in solidarity, service industry workers (tipped and non-tipped) can win better workplaces and lives. Hard-fought and won union campaigns from Starbucks to your local diner can win demands in individual workplaces and shift the needle more broadly. An organized and energized service industry sector can put its weight behind demands like those in the Restaurant Workers Bill of Rights and actually win them.

Tipped workers need to fight back to bring an end to the sub-minimum wage.

Tipping won't disappear overnight. But if workers fight to end the sub-minimum wage and raise the federal minimum wage (\$15 is a good start, \$19 is better), we'll be a long way toward realizing that goal. Service workers can organize around the demand for an across-the-industry raise for all workers, regardless of position, and finally get to a place where we can pronounce tipping dead. ■

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, and is on the editorial board of Reform & Revolution magazine.

What's Behind the Big Tech Layoffs?



BY JONATHAN LORD

Beneath a Facade of Hard-Times Efficiency, Corporate Greed Drives Tech Exec Moves.

As a business owner, how would you respond to two years of all-time high revenues and profits? If your instinct is to make record-breaking stock buybacks and fire double-digit percentages of your employees, you might be qualified to be a Big Tech CEO. Since the start of 2022, the tech sector has laid off over 200,000 workers, with no signs of slowing down. At the same time, overall layoffs and unemployment have been at their lowest point in decades.

What's Happening?

Tech executives behind recent layoffs have variously attributed the decision to fire thousands of workers to rising interest rates, over-hiring during the early

stages of the pandemic, inflation, and a general decrease in profitability. While some of these factors are at least partially present for some companies, the facts in aggregate paint a very different picture. Rather than a picture of responsible executive teams shepherding their companies through stormy times, we instead see the pursuit of infinitely increasing profits, driving dangerously short-sighted decisions on critical social infrastructure – decisions that affect our entire society made with no democratic input.

Vital infrastructure is run to satisfy the demands of near-term profit maximization.

Alphabet, the parent company of Google, recently announced the largest layoffs of any tech company in this period. They also authorized \$70 billion in stock buybacks in 2022, enough to pay all of the laid off workers' paychecks for over 40 years. It's not just Alphabet – across the tech industry, companies like Microsoft and Salesforce are seeing some of the highest revenues and profits they've ever seen. The key to understanding the panic in the tech industry lies in what they aren't seeing: high year-over-year growth in the rate of profit. It's not enough to just make more money than ever before – the rate at which the profits grow must go up and stay up.

The conventional-wisdom response to this scenario is to decrease expenses, and for the capitalist class, no expense is as compressible as labor. Office leases and cloud computing contracts last for years and come with penalties if broken, and server farms are hard to liquidate. But thanks to decades of union busting and corporate lobbying, workers can be eliminated on a whim.

The dark irony is that, for all their brutality, layoffs aren't even effective. Companies would be punished by shareholders and activist investors for

not decreasing labor costs when their competitor companies are doing so, but decades of profitability studies show that actually going through with layoffs tends to decrease the long-term profitability of a company. The main long-term benefit companies secure with layoffs is instilling fear and discipline in their labor force.

However, not all tech companies are seeing record revenues; some are genuinely facing steep decreases in revenue and profitability. These companies tend to be mid-sized or smaller and have outsized portions of their operating expenses covered by debt, meaning the Fed's interest rate hikes have hit them particularly hard. They may be a leading indicator of things to come for the rest of the economy. Even among these companies, record-high stock buybacks and executive compensation combined with record-low reinvestment and mass layoffs typify the response to economic downturn.

Why Is This a Problem?

Tech companies run some of the most important social infrastructure in the world. Over 90% of internet traffic passes through a cloud provider. Amazon, Microsoft, and Google together corner two-thirds of that market. Companies like Stripe and Square process billions of dollars of payments per day, including payments for utilities and local taxes for cities across the US. All of this vital infrastructure is run to satisfy the demands of near-term profit maximization, rather than the fulfillment of human need.

Take Twitter for example. After Elon Musk's purchase of the company, he set about reducing operating expenses by firing over half the workforce. Predictably, the number of outages and partial outages across the service have been rapidly rising. While it's not the end of the world if a social media platform starts having more outages, we can watch the same pattern unfold in other parts of the tech industry as layoffs lead to more and more services becoming unusable or outright shuttered. For example, Amazon has experienced a number of high-profile outages since the start of their mass layoff campaign last year.

On the other end of the labor cost-savings equation are the side effects of pursuing increased automation. Google and Microsoft are currently engaged in an artificial intelligence arms race. They are each trying to stake out a first-mover advantage in developing a new generation of AI that can be used to automate knowledge work previously thought of as impossible to automate – the work of journalists, software developers, legal writers, and so on. The hope is that this automation will drive productivity increases and help bolster the rate of profit.

A number of socially harmful outcomes are already cropping up. Microsoft and Google's new search chat bots are confidently providing blatantly incorrect information wrapped in the trustworthy guise of the world's largest information brokers. Meta is using your Instagram posts to train its AI models, and AI image generators are slurping up copyrighted works of art and personal photos alike. Privacy concerns, information integrity, and other social goods are clearly not being allowed to stand in the way of potential profits.

Privacy concerns, information integrity, and other social goods are clearly not being allowed to stand in the way of potential profits.

In the anarchy of the market, companies are punished for long-term planning, but the "optimal" short-term moves – layoffs, buybacks, rushed releases of new technology – can have devastating effects on society. The rewards of increased productivity will not go to the workers using these new AI technologies in their work or to reducing the need of workers to toil across society writ large. The gains will be hoarded to enrich the already wealthy.

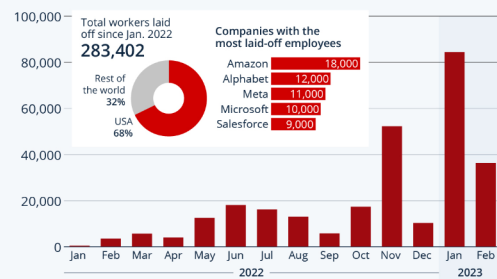
What Can We Do About It?

One of the most hopeful trends of the recent period is the rise in worker militancy and unionization, and the tech industry is no exception. Nothing gets built without the workers who build it and there is a rising tendency among tech workers to demand control not just over their working conditions, but the direction and planning of their work.

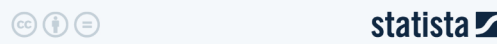
Employees at Google, Netflix, Amazon, Intel, and many more have gone on strike and walked out to force these mega corporations to grant concessions. While many recent actions have been over bread-and-butter workplace issues like sick days, just as many have been broader in scope, such as the "No Tech For Apartheid" movement in which Amazon and Google employees protested their work being used to support the Israeli military, or the 2018 campaign that successfully prevented Google from renewing an AI program helping the US military operate drones. A refreshingly common focus for recent tech worker movements has been democracy: that technology has been used to concentrate, rather than disperse, control over society. Notably, the Alphabet Workers' Union (a minority union representing workers at Google and its parent

The Winter Wave of Tech Layoffs Continues

Number of workers laid off worldwide in the tech/startup sector since Jan. 2022



As of Mar. 2, 2023
Source: Layoffs.fyi



Source: [tinyurl.com/statista-tech-layoff](https://www.tinyurl.com/statista-tech-layoff)



On November 1, 2018, more than 20,000 Google employees engaged in a world-wide walkout to protest the way in which the company handled cases of sexual harassment and other grievances.

Photo from a video report by Voice of America, VOA, November 5, 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_Google_walkouts

company) lists as part of its mission that workers will “control what we work on and how it is used.”

The small size of the new forces in tech labor stands in sharp contrast to the ambitious scope of our demands. Workplace actions have tended to be organized loosely, without the protection of NLRB-recognized bargaining units and without the target of securing a formal contract with the employer, and certainly not conducted in affiliation with a political party.

Even securing those NLRB-recognized bargaining units in the first place has proven difficult. Individualist consciousness is rife in the tech industry, particularly in more prestigious roles like the full-time software engineer. For decades, the argument has been that if you don’t like your work environment, you have the rare and valuable skills needed to find a new job. This mindset is slowly changing alongside the rise of AI-based automation and ever-larger portions of the American post-secondary education system being dedicated to churning out new tech workers.

Another difficulty in organizing tech workers is the extra danger that H-1B visa holders are placed in. The H-1B visa is a temporary work visa which allows highly-skilled workers to stay in the United States as long as they’re employed by a company willing to sponsor them. Up to 30 percent of some tech companies are made up of H-1B workers. If a citizen-worker is afraid of being fired, an H-1B worker is afraid of being fired and then having their entire family deported. I can speak from personal experience that some of my most passionate coworkers have wanted to join in workplace actions, but ultimately kept their heads down because of the extreme risk of retaliation. Clearly, the fight for immigrants’ rights is also the tech worker’s fight.

On the more directly political side of things, there’s a growing anti-monopolistic trend among progressive Democrats that is best expressed in calls to break up Big Tech. While it’s true that tech companies are bigger than they’ve ever been and are exerting anti-competitive pressures, a more complete solution lies not in simply breaking apart large companies into many smaller ones and playing monopoly whack-a-mole, but in nationalization and democratic public ownership. If the infrastructure run by Big Tech is too important to be left in so few hands, then slightly increasing the number of hands controlling it is a poor substitute for democratic control, particularly when those companies – large or small – would be subject to making decisions under the same market pressures.

There is a utopianism common among tech workers. Much of our work is driven by the urge to eliminate toil. We spend countless hours in interminable debate trying to apply rational planning to everything we touch. Often that instinct is twisted, in the form of capitalist megalomaniacs like the Elon Musks, the Bill Gateses, and the “effective altruists” of the world, who see what is good and what is profitable as being one and the same. But there is also a healthy expression to that utopian urge. We are workers representing one-tenth of the entire US economy, and our role as workers is the starting point for any attempt to change society. If we want to have any hope of avoiding the devastations of capitalism’s cyclic boom and bust cycles and the chaotic disruptions of the unplanned marketplace, we need to take control of our work. ■

Jonathan Lord is a pseudonym. Jonathan is an active DSA member and works in the tech sector but prefers to remain anonymous to keep their job.

Are Tech Workers Really Workers?

From “go home tech bro” stickers to the zine spotted at a protest titled “Kill Your Local Techie,” a small but vocal segment of the left sees tech workers as diet-capitalists at worst, and class traitors at best. Often these ideas are prompted by a misguided analysis of very real problems exacerbated by tech companies.

For example, many noted during Amazon’s 2018 search for a city to host its new headquarters that the project would spur a new wave of gentrification. A strong response to the project would involve heavy taxation, rent control, and the construction of large amounts of high-quality public housing. But the left is demoralized and disorganized, so instead we saw the above stickers and zines. If we’re to have any hope of contending with the world that tech companies have forced upon us, we have to understand the role of the workers in the industry.

Tech workers are in an interesting place economically. Pay ranges from relatively high to incredibly high. Most positions in the industry don’t require specialized degrees or certification, unlike with doctors or pilots. The high pay has little to do with organized struggle or unions, unlike with long-shore workers or UPS drivers. Tech workers often have a considerable degree of autonomy in choosing how to carry out their work.

And yet, the basic relations of being a worker remain. The amount of revenue generated by a software engineer is typically many times what they get paid (\$1.5 million a year in revenue per employee is a common benchmark). Deskilling and automation are constant forces working to put downward pressure on wages, and upward pressure on the amount of productivity squeezed out of each employee (a holy grail of artificial intelligence has long been to eliminate the programmer). Tech workers don’t own the servers, and they don’t own the intermedi-

ate software inputs to production. What they own is the ability to work.

So tech workers are workers, but the specifics still matter. High pay and autonomy influence consciousness and add difficulty to organizing. Some tech workers, especially the highest paid, don’t like to think of themselves as fundamentally similar to any other worker, and fail to see their common interest. Many tech workers dream of finding independence by starting their own company. Very few ever do, but ubiquitous tales of plucky tech startups “disrupting” entire industries help convince some tech workers that they’re actually business owners in waiting rather than workers. Rising interest rates and the drought of cheap money for startups will likely push that dream even further out of reach and continue to clarify the difference between an owner and a well-paid worker.

Not all tech workers are the same, either. Many think of the full-time software engineer as the archetypal tech worker, but tech companies don’t run without armies of quality assurance testers, analysts, help desk and support staff, temps, contractors, data center and physical infrastructure employees, and, especially, precarious immigrant and outsourced labor. Salary, job security, and autonomy vary massively across these groups. Unionization has so far been won primarily in the hardest-pressed sections, with game developers and physical infrastructure workers being of particular note.

Despite the barriers to organizing tech workers, the task is an important one. The tech industry accounts for almost 10 percent of the United States’ GDP, most of that concentrated in the five largest tech companies. Not only that, but the knock-on effects of a strike or other action could be multiplied many times by how many other industries are dependent on tech for their day-to-day operations. For an extreme example, if Amazon, Microsoft, or Google employees were to disrupt their companies’ cloud operations, the global economy would grind to a halt: banks unable to communicate with each other, most consumer internet traffic dead, and nearly every website the average person uses either shut down or severely impacted. That’s an immensely powerful weapon to wield. Tech workers are workers and are in need of organizing. Socialists ignore that at our own peril. ■

“The Right to Strike Means Very Little If You Can Be Sued for Exercising It”



AN INTERVIEW WITH BEN BERGER
BY STEPHAN KIMMERLE

In Glacier Northwest, Inc. v. International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local Union No. 174, the Supreme Court is considering whether to permit employers to sue unions for alleged property damages resulting from a work stoppage. Ben Berger, a labor lawyer in Seattle who is part of the legal team representing Teamsters Local 174 at the Supreme Court, explains to us what’s at stake.

Ben, you’ve been involved in the so-called Glacier vs. Teamster case at the Supreme Court. What is the importance of this case?

The technical issue that the Supreme Court decided to hear is whether the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) impliedly preempts a state tort claim against a union for “intentionally destroying an employer’s property” during a “labor dispute.” What that means practically is the Court is deciding whether employers who are upset about business losses during a strike can sue unions in state court, or whether those disputes have to first be channeled to the National Labor Relations Board, the NLRB.

While that dispute seems like a very dry technical issue, it actually has significant ramifications for the right to strike.

Why is this important? What if the Supreme Court says it’s OK to sue unions in state court before or in parallel to the NLRB process?

What that means for the labor movement is, you would have the Supreme Court saying it’s open season on unions and workers, to file state law claims for destruction of property based on what happens during a strike.

Preemption means: Whenever the federal laws of the US government conflict with state laws, the federal laws have to trump. The NLRA trumps state laws.

Preemption is supposed to work by quickly removing a case from state court so you don’t have to litigate it there. Even having to undergo the expense of litigating can be ruinous. Hiring a lawyer is not cheap. Even if a union would win in the end in state court, making unions or workers go through the expense of litigating such claims in state court, is going to take away a lot of the union’s resources and could potentially bankrupt them for engaging in what is in actuality protected conduct.

Hypothetically, if Glacier wins at the Supreme Court, it does not mean that automatically the union will lose the state law claim. It just opens the door to many more such cases. Employers could then sue unions and go after their resources, but it could result in individual workers being sued as well.

But even if the union wins this case in front of the Supreme Court: in accepting this case the Supreme Court already engaged in taking away the swift process of preemption, right?

Some damage is done because unions and workers will now know that this risk is looming over them, and that can potentially affect strike planning.

Under current law, unions can strike in an effective way, for example with a sudden work stoppage. Until now, there’s no dispute that you have the right to do that as long as you take very basic precautions. But now it seems possible that you could incur a lawsuit if any amount of employer product gets spoiled.

An employer could come along and say: “Hey, we lost profits because of your strike. We’re going to sue you for those lost profits.” So, that risk hangs over unions. Unions could therefore say, “all right, we’ll strike, but let’s try and accommodate companies to avoid liability. We’ll give them notice – like, weeks ahead of time – that that we’re going to strike and assist them in every possible way to avoid damage.” If you announce a strike weeks or days in advance, even sometimes hours in advance, the employer can make itself strike-proof.

The ability to deprive the employer of your labor by engaging in a work stoppage is, when it comes down to it, the only serious weapon workers have against capital. The right to do so means very little if you can be sued for exercising it.

And so, if we have this new system where you’re basically telling the employer in advance of a strike, then the strikes are not going to be very effective. Losing a strike will often result in contracts that are less favorable to workers. Unions may decide not to strike at all and just accept a worse offer. The economic realities of that are going to be lower wages, fewer benefits, and an economic system that’s more favorable to the ownership class.

When can we expect a decision from the Supreme Court?

We’re expecting a decision no later than June.

The case in question is about the Teamsters 174, in Seattle. Glacier is the employer on the other side. What happened?

Glacier is one of four major sand and gravel companies in the King County area. They are all union, and historically they bargain in a coordinated fashion. Local 174 represents the drivers at each of these companies in King County. Glacier not only delivers the concrete, it actually makes the concrete at its facility (called batching the concrete). It also has some mines, where it mines the underlying gravel aggregate material. The drivers the union represents deliver the concrete from the company’s facilities to contractors and customers throughout the area.

In 2017, Local 174 gave notice several months in advance that the contract was terminating. In July of that year, its workers took a strike authorization vote, which the union publicized. The employer knew a strike was possible. The company did anticipate the strike and made some preparations, but it took the risk to continue operating anyway because it wanted to make profits during the period where the contract had expired. But the no-strike provision in that contract had expired with that contract.

The NLRA was passed in the 1930s during the New Deal era. It preserves the preexisting right to strike. The Supreme Court has also recognized that workers have the right to strike in a way that applies economic pressure to their employer. That’s kind of the point of a strike. The only limit is, and this becomes very important in this case, that under the NLRB’s doctrine you have to take reasonable precautions to prevent aggravated, imminent, foreseeable harm to the plant premises and to persons.

And did the Teamsters 174 harm the plant premises and persons?



Striking Teamsters from Local 174 picket outside a Glacier/CalPortland facility in 2021. The Supreme Court case is based on an earlier concrete strike in 2017.
Photo: tinyurl.com/The-Stand-IBT174

No. This is what happened: We're going back to August 11, 2017. At 7:00 a.m., the union called a strike. The day had gotten started and workers were in the middle of various stages of the batching and delivering process, continuously picking up loads of concrete at the plant and delivering them. The union notified the drivers of the strike through a text and through the company's radio that, basically, we're now on strike. Please return your vehicles to your yard, follow your supervisor's instructions on what to do with your truck. If you need to wash it out, because sometimes there's residual concrete, follow those instructions. And if they want you to dump the concrete somewhere, do that. So they said, bring the trucks back to the company's care and let them deal with it.

The company, of course, gets on the radio and says, no, no, you have to complete deliveries. But the contract had expired. There is no obligation for workers to do that. So all the drivers returned their trucks to the yard. The vast majority had no concrete in their truck anyway, but around 15 to 20 drivers had full loads of concrete still in their truck.

And most of those sought out their supervisor as they were instructed or left their trucks running. So the barrels were still spinning, which delays the concrete hardening, potentially for hours.

The company, despite knowing that a strike could happen, hadn't scheduled replacement drivers or any other way to deliver the concrete.

The only thing the company did here is, they took over the trucks and with the assistance of its other employees and even some of the drivers just offloaded the concrete. And then the union set up the picket line, and we had a week-long strike. But there was no damage to Glacier's yard or equipment. Just unused concrete that hardened at Glacier's yards and had to get hauled away later.

And then the legal battle starts.

After the strike ends, the company sends out warning letters to about 15 drivers, those who returned with full loads, saying, you broke a company work rule by not delivering the concrete to the customer and not properly handling your truck. And that is very clearly, from the union's perspective, and under current law, punishing drivers for engaging in a strike. But strikes are protected. The union then filed an unfair labor practice charge with the NLRB, alleging Glacier was retaliating against drivers for engaging in protected conduct.

While that investigation was starting, a couple months later, the company sued the union in Washington State Court basically saying that by organizing this walkout

of drivers on August 11, the union had conspired to intentionally destroy its concrete. In response, the union argued to the NLRB that the bosses were basically trying to sue the union for engaging in a strike, which is another kind of unfair labor practice.

If anyone is going to decide whether this was lawful or not, it should be the NLRB. And so we argued to the state court that the claims were preempted by the NLRA. Drivers were engaged in a protected strike. We won at the trial court level of state court. We got reversed at the intermediate court. And then we won nine-nothing at the Washington State Supreme Court.

The victory at the state supreme court resolved other allegations that were tying up the Board's ability to proceed with its investigations. So in January 2022, the NLRB's General Counsel finally issued a complaint against Glacier. An administrative law judge held a trial over the General Counsel's complaint against the company in February and March 2023.

However, Glacier went to the US Supreme Court to challenge that ruling of the Washington State Supreme Court.

And the outcome of the NLRB hearing ...

... is also not yet decided.

This process, that the NLRB hears the case first and that it's not dealt with in state courts – that's based on precedent from 1959, correct?

Yes. The Supreme Court ruled in 1959, in the *San Diego Building Trades Council v. Garmon* case, that the party who asserts preemption, union or employer, only needs to show that the underlying conduct is arguably protected or prohibited by the NLRA. And what that means is, once you've shown that the case is at least arguably subject to the NLRA, you gotta put the state action on hold or dismiss it and give the NLRB the first opportunity to decide whether the underlying conduct is actually protected or prohibited.

If it decides there's no protected or prohibited conduct, then go ahead, you can restart the state court action. It's really about which entity gets to decide first.

Why is this sequence so important?

If this conduct – the work stoppage – is protected, and we're entirely confident that under existing case law, the strike *was* protected, and the NLRB decides that way, then it truly does prevent the state action from going forward. The employer could then still try to

overturn this NLRB decision in federal court. But then it's a discussion about what the NLRA means as applied to the evidence that came out at a Board trial.

The alternative is to say, even as the NLRB is adjudicating its case, a state court gets to decide whether certain conduct creates liability under state law. The union is then forced to engage – with time, money, and other resources – in the state court case in parallel.

And that parallel case could potentially conflict with what the NLRB decides. Then you could have a state law decision saying hypothetically that the union's conduct was illegal, which completely undermines the NLRB's authority.

So, this case is not only about workers' right to strike, though it very much is. It is also about trying to disempower the NLRB, the very entity that Congress in the New Deal era entrusted to decide these issues.

How did all of this then play out in front of the Supreme Court?

It was kind of a whirlwind. It all happened pretty quickly. The company ultimately filed its appeal in spring. We opposed it. And then we found out in October, 2022, the Supreme Court was going to take the case. And it's actually a pretty quick process, like boom, boom, boom, over just a couple months. You have to brief the argument and then be prepared to argue in front of the judges in January. In October, Local 174 retained the Stanford Supreme Court Clinic as co-counsel to work with our office on the Supreme Court brief, which was a great experience. We got to work with some really experienced Supreme Court litigators and very bright law students, and the collaborative effort resulted in a brief we think the movement can be proud of, whatever the case's outcome.

Was this your first time at the Supreme Court?

Yes, it would probably be the first time for many labor lawyers because there are so few labor cases that come before the Supreme Court. It's the first time for everyone at my firm.

The decline of union density in the last 50 years also led to a decline in labor law as an area of law that's taught in law schools, that's practiced, and cases that come before the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court gets precious few cases in the labor area, and even fewer that deal with this preemption issue.

What was the atmosphere there?

The Supreme Court is always a pretty hot bench because they take cases that are interesting. But it's

a very formal environment with robes and so on. But you're very close up to the justices. When you're sitting at a counsel table, it's almost like you're looking up at them more than toward them from a distance. You're just seated below them.

An interior design of power?

Certainly, yeah.

You've mentioned the 15 truck drivers who got the letters when the company went after them. Have they been involved at the Supreme Court?

Not in front of the Supreme Court, but in the NLRB case. Around 12 of those drivers testified there.

How do they take it, that such a big Supreme Court case developed out of them taking strike action?

A lot of these drivers are basically ready to move on with their lives. It's been five and a half, six years. In fact, since the 2017 strike, there has been another strike in the same industry that was actually longer and harder and a more difficult fight, at least from a non-legal point of view. That was last year, in 2022. So it's kind of surreal that we're still fighting about a strike that has happened so long ago.

I don't think anyone anticipated at the time that returning their trucks to the yard and following their employer's instructions to dump the concrete was going to lead to a Supreme Court case. None of us anticipated that.

What happened to this concrete that was dumped out? Is there still a pile of hardened concrete somewhere, like a concrete monument for this strike?

The concrete was dumped in some bunkers. Other workers, non-driver employees, set those up. These are three-sided walls or blocks and you just let this liquid concrete settle within these structures that you've built, it hardens and then it gets broken up and disposed of at some other facility. This happens regularly.

At some places, they have these machines called reclaimers. They're really quite impressive. You dump the concrete into one end, then it spits out the aggregate, the cement, and the water separately on the other end, so it can be reused.

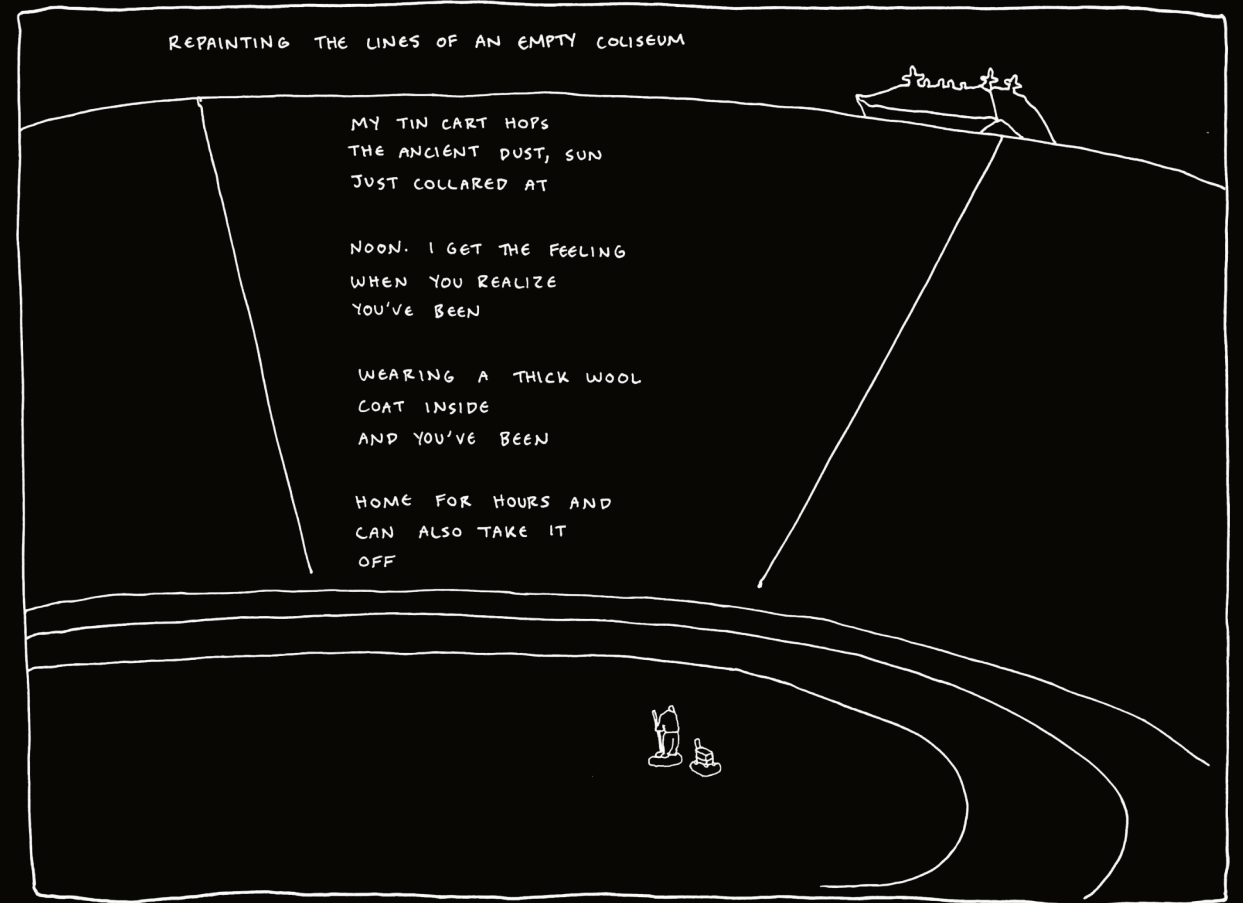
But even at the facilities where they had a big pile of hardened concrete in these bunkers, it got hauled away. So the concrete isn't there anymore. It doesn't exist as a monument anymore. But the story does. ■



BY ALEX MONI-SAURI

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She lives in Kingston, Washington.*



Capitalism Off The Rails



BY MEG MORRIGAN

“What rolls through on those trucks is of more value than the lives of the residents in this community.”

With this quote, a resident of East Palestine, Ohio perfectly sums up the causes and response to the deadly train derailment that occurred in the tiny town.

A Totally Avoidable Disaster Unfolds

On February 3, 38 of the 150 cars on a Norfolk Southern train derailed and crashed in a fiery inferno, and resulted in the release of extremely toxic compounds into the environment. Despite the common nature of train derailments – there were over 1,000 in 2022 – this disaster was uniquely devastating and received a much higher level of scrutiny due to the hazardous chemicals involved. It is shining a sorely-needed light on the inner workings of corporate railroads just months after a national railroad strike was blocked by Congress and President Biden.

The derailment was caused by an overheated wheel bearing. Despite track-side alarm systems and a quick response from the engineer, by the time the train was stopped and the crew able to disembark to investigate, there were already signs of derailment and fire. This calls into question all manner of safety standards and operation procedures of Norfolk Southern and railroad companies in general, from the efficacy

of track-side monitors and other safety equipment to the corporate policies that railroads have been pushing.

Policies like allowing dispatchers to ignore alarms (described in ProPublica), pushing for 1-person crews, cutting staffing, using longer trains and running on a tight schedule, are all in use by rail companies like Norfolk Southern to cut costs and increase profits. As the saying goes among railway workers, “Safety is fine until it costs a dime”. (*Kansas Star*, December 12, 2022)

Workers Warned of the Dangers

In the 2022 contract negotiations of railroad workers, the lack of sick days got the most media attention. However, these types of safety issues were among the rail workers’ unions’ pressing concerns that led to them threatening an economy-halting strike. It is damning but not surprising that just months after Congress and President Biden voted to block the strike and force a contract on rail workers we are seeing deadly consequences.

Disgracefully, three out of four DSA representatives in Congress also voted to impose the contract, flagrantly disregarding the values of worker power and democratic socialism that they were elected on.

The Congressional decision to block the rail strike and the degradation of the environment in East Palestine are part of the same process: decades of deregulation and disempowering railway workers.

The decision to block the rail strike and the degradation of the environment in East Palestine are part of the same process: decades of deregulation and disempowering railway workers. This is a clear illustration of the government-corporate ruling-class alliance implementing pro-profit decisions at the expense of the working class. Railway Workers United, a reform caucus pushing for change within the railway unions, has demanded public ownership of the railways, a demand DSA should support (railroadworkersunited.org/public-ownership-of-the-railroads).

Democratic worker control cannot prevent all train derailments, but certainly they will only increase in number and intensity for as long as railroad companies are allowed to ruthlessly pursue higher profits at every turn.

A Profit-First Response

The crash and subsequent fire led a tanker of volatile vinyl chloride to increase in temperature and threaten to explode, potentially not just releasing the hazardous chemical but also projecting metal shrapnel. To avoid such destruction, officials opted for a “controlled explosion” to release the gas without the debris, spilling 115,580 gallons of toxic material into the air, water, and soil – including dioxins, a known carcinogen. Throughout this crisis, the EPA and national and local governments have taken a back seat, allowing the culprit of the disaster – Norfolk Southern – to make the major decisions, evaluate safety, and perform their own tests.

For weeks, the EPA resisted testing the soil for dioxins, but they finally bowed under pressure and on March 3 asked Norfolk Southern to do the tests. In the meantime, the state of Indiana tested two soil samples from near the crash site and found dioxin levels at 700 parts per trillion (ppt). Federal rules trigger a cleanup at 1,000 ppt, so an EPA official celebrated these “very low” levels during March 9 congressional testimony as “good news.” This is despite the fact that the EPA’s own research in 2010 found that cancer risk starts at 3.7 ppt and advocated lowering the threshold for cleanup to 72 ppt, guidelines that were shut down by the Obama Administration.

What’s happened in East Palestine shows just how far supposedly “neutral” bodies like the EPA will go to sacrifice public health for political expediency.

So, were this “controlled explosion” and its deadly consequences really worth it? Critics have said the decision was more about reopening the railway and keeping profits flowing than about public safety. Indeed, residents have reported the railway is even

busier than usual, with train cars double-stacked with profitable cargo, while those living nearby haven’t been offered any meaningful compensation for their health concerns or decimated home values.

Evacuated residents in a one-by-two mile area that crossed the Pennsylvania border were told it was safe to return after just a few days. Norfolk Southern has been ordered to clean up the mess, but despite the efforts so far, and the insistence of local, state, and federal authorities that tests indicate safe levels of contaminants, the people of East Palestine have been reporting various health issues. Skin rashes, respiratory problems, burning eyes and throats, nausea and stomach pain are among the ills reported, as well as the death and disease of animals. The environmental impact is certainly catastrophic. By February 23, the animal death toll had already been estimated at over 43,700 according to CBS News, and the long-term impacts are not yet known.

Inconsistent and sensational reporting around the event makes it difficult to see the full picture. Norfolk Southern has been tight-lipped about the details of their investigations while sensational headlines comparing the derailment to Chernobyl make waves on social media. One outlet reported that the chemicals haven’t contaminated waterways while another published an article about the plume of chemicals traveling the Ohio river. One journalist was even arrested while reporting on the disaster, though the charges against him were dropped. But even with the best assumptions, it is nothing short of a disaster that working people will pay for with their health and livelihood.

A Failure of Both Parties

This disaster highlights the failures of both parties of big business and the power of the railway lobby. Although Obama, after a series of high-profile train derailments, instituted safety reforms such as requiring electronic braking systems, the rules weren’t to take effect until 2023. The Trump administration then killed the regulations. And where has the Biden administration been? The president made a trip to Ukraine to pursue his proxy war against Russia but has yet to visit or make a statement about East Palestine as of the writing of this article.

Pete Buttigieg, Biden’s Transportation Secretary, took 17 days to visit the town and has done virtually nothing to help the people struggling with the health and economic impacts of the disaster. Even the public health clinic that was set up offers only advice and no real medical services. Despite his potential role in creating the disaster, Trump is

“ I live in East Palestine Ohio, this was the view from my front yard on the night of February 3rd.”

Photo: [thunderlips36, tinyurl.com/Feb3-Ohio](https://www.tinyurl.com/Feb3-Ohio),
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capitalizing on this failure, delivering “Trump water” in a visit to the besieged town.

The residents of East Palestine and other poor and working-class victims of corporate-manufactured environmental catastrophes deserve much more than to be political pawns. They deserve a real clean-up effort, monetary compensation for their decimated home values – including relocation fees if they choose – and lifelong, free medical care to cover any unforeseen health outcomes of this disaster. But these steps don’t line the pockets of big businesses, nor do they win elections for corporate-friendly politicians. Without massive backlash from regular people and an upsurge in environmentalist organizing, this is another disaster that will be swept under the rug as we continue to rush towards environmental devastation.

An Eco-socialist Approach Needed

The daisy chain of failures surrounding this disaster illuminate just how inadequate global capitalism is at cleaning up its own messes, much less proactively taking steps to heal the environment. Even as the planet hurdles closer and closer to climate catastrophe, the ruling class not only goes on with business as usual but even continues to look for new ways to cut corners and increase their profits, leading to escalating environmental calamities. Some will be explosive, such as train accidents or oil rig failures, but many others are more steady, constant streams

of degradation such as the millions of tons of plastic waste created by capitalism every year.

A rational system would look at the disaster in East Palestine and pause to question the wisdom of corporate-controlled railways. But a new oil railroad is being built next to the Colorado River, a vital water source for 40 million people including 30 tribal nations. Despite the Biden administration’s claim to want to reduce emissions, according to *The Guardian*, March 9, 2023, this railway would enable an additional 350,000 barrels of oil extraction a day. Clearly, the fight to curb the power of the railway lobby and the fight against climate change are linked.

Weak governmental reforms and public pressure are not enough to coerce the ruling class to act in ways that benefit the global majority – there is no kinder, safer, greener future under capitalism. We need a decisive rupture with capitalism, ending the profit motive and bringing the biggest companies and industries, like the railroads, under public ownership, planned and controlled at the national level, and run democratically by the workers with direct input from users and communities. A railway led this way would actually be empowered to put the health and safety of the workers and people who live in rail-side communities first. ■

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A Rupture With the Capitalist Police



BY STEPHAN KIMMERLE

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A Marxist Contribution to the Debate About Defunding and Abolishing the Police

Police abolitionists' view on how working-class and oppressed people will get free is radical in its aspirations for liberation. Their vision of a liberated society based on economic, gender, and racial justice, as well as solidarity and collaboration, is energizing and powerful.

Their conception of change, however, does not include a revolutionary rupture based on the working class taking economic and state power. This is a significant omission. Most abolitionist thinkers who attempt to integrate abolitionism into a socialist and Marxist framework do not overcome that contradiction. The prevailing outlook within the abolitionist tradition, among both theorists and activists, imagines police and prison abolition as a gradual change – one that may eventually lead to a change in the overall social and economic order, but which starts long before the dominance of capital has been broken. Abolition is thought of as happening outside of, or independent of, the framework of a revolutionary transformation of society.

This is linked to the assumption that every step toward fewer police will bring more safety to working-class and BIPOC communities. This contrasts with the realities of a deeply divided class society and leads to a loss of support for the radical left.

Here are two key Marxist theses for the discussion:

a) The state is a product of class divisions, not its source. To abolish the police is in effect to abolish a vital element of the capitalist state. However, you can't abolish the state or its key parts without abolishing classes. Otherwise, the state and its main organs will regrow like the many heads of the Hydra.

In a deeply divided society, polarized to the extreme on many fronts, any vacuum of force fills itself. And if the working class is not very well-organized, lacking consciousness of its power and potential role, that vacuum will be filled not by working-class forces, but by *SafetyFriends™* or *Copz 20 Edge X* or some other rebranded version of the capitalist police. Attempts to focus the struggle for liberation specifically on the state or the police will fail.

Still, battles around the state, democracy, and freedom from unjust repression are important, as these can have a big impact on the class struggle overall. There are huge differences in the conditions of struggle for the working class and oppressed people when they are confronted with, for example, fascist police as compared to police in a capitalist democracy.

However, the path to workers winning the class struggle internationally is not to be found in first reforming or abolishing the state – neither as a whole nor starting with significant parts of it (like the police and prisons). To be sure, struggles for democratic demands, for state reforms, can lead to significant improvements in the conditions of our struggles and be an avenue by which workers build their collective power, class consciousness, and revolutionary potential. However, these reforms can never themselves solve the underlying problems that necessitate struggle in the first place.

b) Winning the class struggle means organizing a rupture with capitalism's power structure economically, politically, and regarding the state. Such a rupture will not be achieved by an incrementalist approach where we reduce police budgets, not even if we reduce them to zero. There is a need for a socialist revolution, spreading internationally, to take power over the major corporations and replace the current capitalist state with a workers' state based on full democracy on all levels. A workers' state would reorganize society based on the needs of people, in harmony with the environ-



The entrance of a Minneapolis bookstore, Moon Palace Books, boarded up and muralized in response to the George Floyd protests of 2020.

Photo: Public Domain, tinyurl.com/abolish-the-police

ment and focused on healing the pain of economic, racial, gender, and so many more oppressions that capitalism has produced and nurtured.

Within such a rupture, the working class will need to radically reorganize the forces of public safety and replace the current police system with a fundamentally different approach. However, this must be accomplished by a strong government based on the interests of the working class – in short, a workers' state – to forcefully defend the rights of the overwhelming majority against the old ruling class and their representatives, and to organize public safety until society is naturally safe and healed of its bitter divisions.

The Police – a Tool of Repression

Police abolitionists and Marxists agree that the police do not act in the interests of working-class people. Capitalist policing is a racist institution through and through. It cannot be reformed. Policing reflects the needs of a highly polarized and polarizing society based on the accumulation of profits on the side of the billionaire class, while working-class people struggle to make ends meet, the planet is set on fire, and the living conditions for humanity are destroyed.

The movement for Black lives highlighted these realities. Mass support for defunding the police rose in the wake of the George Floyd protests and fell afterward. The demand to abolish the police became popular and was written into DSA's political platform in 2021. Several authors like Derecka Purnell (*Becoming Abolitionists*, 2021), Alex S. Vitale (*The End of Policing*, 2017), Angela Davis, and Mariame Kaba have contributed to explaining and deepening abolitionist ideas through their writing. Colin Kaepernick helped to make those ideas more accessible with the anthology, *Abolition for the People* (2021).

The basis of abolitionist ideas lies in a radical analysis of important truths: Police reforms have failed to deliver real change to this repressive institution. It's time for fundamental change that goes to the root of the problem. Instead of rebuilding "trust" in policing by reforming it, the aim is to dismantle the whole repressive apparatus, including the prison-industrial complex.

Writers like Purnell or Davis put their vision in the context of the struggle for a society beyond capitalism. Derecka Purnell advocates joining the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Angela Davis is known as a lifelong Marxist. Purnell writes in *Becoming Abolitionists*:

For me and many of my peers, our abolitionist fight and future is committed to decolonization, disability justice, Earth justice, and socialism. All of these require mass political education, a commitment to understand and debate these issues with people who we love and organize within our communities[.]

In the DSA platform, adopted in 2021 by the National Convention, DSA commits to fight for divesting from police and prisons to invest in communities and endorses the *8 to Abolition* demands as “a basis for our own.” *8 to Abolition* demands among other points:

Free all people from involuntary confinement, including but not limited to jails, prisons, immigrant detention centers, psychiatric wards, and nursing homes, starting with those who are aging, disabled, immunocompromised, held on bail, held for parole violations, and survivors. [...] Reject ‘alternatives to incarceration’ that are carceral in nature, including problem-solving courts and electronic monitoring and coercive restorative justice programs.

The DSA platform states (emphasis in the original):

For all of the working class to achieve collective liberation we must constrain, diminish, and abolish the carceral forces of the state — from prisons and police themselves, to their manifestations in all forms throughout society. Each step forward in reducing the size, power, and authority of the repressive forces of the state expands the space for mass, organized, and collective action of the working class, and clears ground for us to build the institutions of a society to serve our communities with real justice and equality.

DSA nationally endorses the 8 to Abolition demands, which are a basis for our own.

We are committed to the horizon of abolition and the path leading us there.

However, the same DSA platform says:

The Democratic Socialists of America are fighting to win a world organized and governed by and for the vast majority, the working class[.]

And the same National Convention 2021 passed an “electoral resolution” that declares as resolved:

that DSA and its local chapters commit to the project of building a working-class party: a mass democratic political organization capable of taking state power with a strategy for social transformation.

There’s a contradiction between those statements that the socialist movement in general, and DSA activists in particular, have to grapple with. Taking state power means socialists will have to exercise force against those political opponents who want to

undemocratically bring back systems of exploitation and oppression, who take up arms against the democratically elected representatives implementing policies for working-class and oppressed people; and it means using a newly built, fundamentally different state to overcome the legacy of poverty, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression through the development of society in a new economic and political direction. “Taking state power” is a call to be prepared to use forceful measures to repress those who seek to overthrow a democratically elected socialist government as well as to include the use of forceful measures in organizing public safety – in a completely different way than today, to be sure, but still within the limits of a society that is torn by the legacy of exploitation and oppression.

A Socialist Transformation of Society

Any future democratic socialist government – or even just steps in that direction like a Bernie Sanders-style presidency – will face vicious resistance, including attempts to destabilize society and undermine the support of such a government.

The right-wing Capitol riot in Washington, DC on January 6, 2021, was a warning shot. It showed the preparedness of some far-right activists, including the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, to “stand back and stand by” (Trump’s recommendation to them) for some time and be ready to strike as soon as an opportunity opens up. The January 6 uprising was also a farce. No significant part of the ruling class backed this adventure. There was virtually no support in society for such a move. Five people died and more could have been tragically hurt, but there was no chance that this effort would lead to a change in government and much less to any form of system change.

However, it’s not hard to imagine how such a scenario would have played out if the US ruling class would have been confronted with a president-elect Bernie Sanders. There were significant reasons why Sanders did not win the presidency. However, future efforts might very well see social-democratic figures like him, basing themselves on a movement-oriented approach, winning elections on all levels. From the ruling-class point of view, the worst thing about such electoral successes is that they can trigger mass support and enthusiasm for changes in the interests of the working class that go *beyond* radical Sanders-style reforms like Medicare for All, free education, and a \$15 minimum wage.

If Sanders had won the presidency on this basis, the more reckless and brutal parts of the US ruling class would have relied on forces like the Proud Boys and

Oath Keepers to (at minimum) significantly destabilize the situation, attempting to create openings for courts and other parts of the capitalist state to rein in a Sanders administration, or even stop it altogether.

The ruling class does not stop its class struggle when democratic socialists advance. Quite the opposite. They use the state apparatus to repress our movements. They mobilize the worst, most reactionary elements in society to try to undermine working-class victories. While the liberal elites and right-wing corporate leaders do not necessarily share the white supremacist or fascist beliefs of those elements, in the case of crisis they are prepared to unleash those unloved chain dogs.

A workers’ government – an administration that fights to implement a program of, by, and for the working class – will face all kinds of opposition. Either such a government is the starting point for a revolutionary transformation of society and ends the power of the old, capitalist ruling class, or it will be forced to give up its working-class program and sell out. The way to deal with the opposition to such a workers’ government is to expand democracy, to bring democracy to the workplaces and neighborhoods to allow people to organize and decide, bottom-up in society.

However, such a government will also rely on its ability to repress those forces who want to reestablish the rule of a minority over the majority. There has been no revolution in history that has not seen the full resistance of the old ruling classes. In the US, from the revolutionary liberation from British rule to the “Second American Revolution,” the Civil War, all steps forward toward liberation had to be fought out.

Subduing the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys (and others like them), forcefully crushing attempts by the ruling elites to maintain or re-establish their power over the working class – all this needs to be organized. We can’t rely on today’s capitalist police to do that. Nonetheless, to the extent that fascists and far-right goons like the Proud Boys or Oath Keepers find themselves in prison today, we should not be demanding their release. On the contrary, one of our criticisms of today’s capitalist state is precisely that it is not and can never be a reliable force for repressing those far-right forces.

Defund the Police?

We are living in a polarized society marked by ostentatious wealth and appalling poverty, infused with racism and sexism, rife with heterosexism and anti-trans hate crimes – in short, a pressure cooker packed full of social tensions, always on the brink of a potential explosion. Amid such instability, the need for safety is felt by all people, including working-class

people and BIPOC communities. Like so many other basic needs in this society, this need often goes unmet.

People confronted with domestic violence, for example, need much more than a forceful intervention. They need housing, economic independence, mental health services, and so on. But they also need immediate help, the ability to enforce restraining orders, the removal of people who too often act out what a misogynist society has taught them.

Capitalism, by its nature, is constantly injecting new life into reactionary ideologies – but also, just as importantly, reinforcing the practices and behaviors that come with them. Sexist oppression, for example, is not just about misogynist ideas, but also the way in which a sense of entitlement is ingrained into men from an early age, leading to violence in many different forms. We need to abolish patriarchy, fight back against misogyny and sexism, but until we rebuild society on a socialist basis, interventions involving systematic use of force need to remain on the table. These systems of forceful intervention should be organized on the basis of working-class power. Until we have that, we will continue to live in a miserable situation. Simply abolishing the ability of a force that usually acts in the interest of the ruling class, but without any better replacement to fulfill its necessary social functions – that is not a step forward, unfortunately.

While it’s absolutely understandable that not all people feel safe to call the police, there are also many who choose that response for good reasons. The struggle is to organize better responses – not to simply abolish the bad ones we have.

Similarly, even property crimes need to be dealt with. It’s clear that most property crimes are committed out of poverty, substance abuse or other afflictions created by this society. However, burglary is a misery mostly suffered by poor people in poor neighborhoods, who can’t afford high-tech security systems and private security services. Security concerns of communities are real and the organic need to address those concerns will always find expression in one way or another. Where such an organic need exists, removing the public police force will inevitably lead to a mushrooming of new policing forces like private security guards, vigilantes, and gangs – forces which are no better in character, and often even less accountable than police.

Acknowledging the security concerns of working people in no way diminishes the obligation to demand fundamental change for the policing and prison systems. We still need to demand the immediate release of all non-violent offenders impris-

oned for petty crimes, to deflate the bloated police budgets, to end the private prison system, to close all immigrant detention centers, to dissolve ICE and all special units of the police, etc.

However, socialist measures (making society safe by ending poverty, guaranteeing free healthcare, affordable housing and living wage jobs for all) are a precondition to a society without prisons and police. To implement the latter first would be to neglect the safety needs of working-class and oppressed people.

The demand to defund the police is unpopular in opinion polls, including among BIPOC communities, precisely because it's understood to ignore people's safety concerns without providing the resources to change society.

Even if all resources of local police departments were to be re-invested in communities, this would not fundamentally change capitalist society. For example, the Seattle Police Department's annual \$400 million budget would not be enough to cover the costs of building a society with affordable housing, guaranteed living-wage jobs, a Green New Deal, and so on – even on the local scale of Seattle.

In the pressure cooker of capitalist society, the police are the lid. A demand to rip off the lid first, while the cooker itself is still running at full intensity, is not convincing. Like with a real pressure cooker, removing the lid early will not only be quite difficult but potentially dangerous if successful.

By drumming up the fears of working-class people with reports about “crime,” the right wing and moderate Democrats are trying to push back against the struggle of the Black Lives Matter movement and against the demands of the left. It is the system they defend that creates those crimes: poverty, racism, sexism, and so on are built-in features of capitalism. However, that does not mean that the left can simply ignore these questions. Abolitionist slogans that sounded like the left

dismissing the safety needs of working-class people and BIPOC communities did not help to overcome the fears stirred up by the right wing and moderates. The left still faces the challenge of how to win over a majority of the public to its position.

If the arguments here are convincing, then the implications are **that not every step in the direction of abolition of police and prisons is helpful and welcome today.** This stands in line with the aim of DSA's Platform, adopted at the 2021 Convention, to fight for “a world organized and governed by

and for the vast majority, the working class,” but in contrast to what the same platform outlines about abolition.

It also means that “**defund the police**” is not a useful slogan anymore, as it's not identified with a socialist strategy to actually build the tools in society to deal with antisocial behavior and create safety for working-class and oppressed people. We need a different language to fight to deflate bloated police budgets while at the same time fighting for a much bigger change to seize the wealth of the super-rich and use the productive potential of large-scale industry to create wealth

for society instead of profit for the top 0.1 percent. With such a redistribution of resources and reorganization of society, we could immediately fund Medicare for All, mental health services, affordable housing for all, reparations for BIPOC communities, free childcare and education from nursery through university, etc. But this will not come without vicious resistance from the current regime of the billionaire class, which is why it will require an economic and political rupture that topples their power. ■

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Missed Opportunity: The Rise and Fall of Pedro Castillo



AN INTERVIEW WITH PERUVIAN TROTSKYIST FARID MATUK
BY BRANDON MADSEN

How a Lack of Organized Marxist Leadership Undermined the Potential for Transformative Class-Struggle Politics in Peru

When left-wing presidential candidate Pedro Castillo was elected in Peru in 2021, running with the Perú Libre party, it kindled the hopes not only of many workers and poor people in Peru but also of the left internationally. This was certainly true in DSA, which sent a delegation to Peru and published messages of congratulation to Castillo. But by the end of 2022, Castillo had been forced out of office, arrested, and replaced by the pro-capitalist administration of Dina Boluarte.

Ever since, there has been a combative protest movement by the poorest and most oppressed layers of Peruvian society against the new regime. These protests have been met with police violence, with January 2023 marking the largest mass killing of protesters by police since at least the 1960s. Unfortunately, the protest movement has so far been unable to break through and achieve any real gains in terms of regime change, constitutional reform, an expansion of democracy, or other issues.

To get an inside perspective, I interviewed Farid Matuk, an economist by profession and Peru's former chief statistician, who has been a prominent left figure in the country for several decades. A self-described “full-time Trotskyist militant” from 1975 to 1982, he reports having twice been detained by authorities for his political activism: first for a few days in 1976 for protesting against a visit by Henry Kissinger, and then for four days on trumped-up charges of being an “ambassador for terrorists” in

1993. He ran for Congress as a member of the left bloc Frente Amplio (“Broad Front”) in 2020, though he was not elected. He has been an outspoken critic of Peru's right-wing governments, advised several elected leftist politicians, and worked for national ministries under left-leaning governments, including in the ministries of Production and Agriculture under Castillo, but this has in no way blunted his sharp criticisms of the left's recent and past mistakes.

First, with the dozens of protesters recently killed by police, I have to ask – is it dangerous to be an activist in Peru right now? Are people afraid to protest?

It's still a lot less dangerous than under the government of Fujimori in the 1990s. You don't have a death squad that goes to your house. They pretend to give you some sort of due process. The main risk of harm to protesters comes from the police at the demonstrations. There is a sort of deep state in the police and in the army that shoots to kill. No president, no matter how left or progressive they were supposed to be, has ever stopped them. The old #1 record for police killing the most protesters in a single day – prior to it being topped this January in Juliaca, Puno – actually happened under a pro-Soviet government in 1969.

“Castillo arrived in government as a recognized leader of the left ... mainly because he had been there in the streets leading very large strikes.”

When the police decide to kill people, they simply do it. But I wouldn't say that this is something coming from the president. Instead, I would say that the police

and the army have a large degree of autonomy, and no one in power has ever seriously tried to unroot that.

But are people afraid to protest? I don't think so. The killing has been very selective, targeting individual protesters, not smashing up organizations of the left. So, in that way, I disagree with anyone who might call this a fascist government. It's not. And lately, the killing has been slowly reduced. The last ones on a mass scale were in January in the south of Peru, and now we are more or less back at the "habitual" level of violence.

This is a very old and deeply rooted problem in Latin America generally, not just Peru. The police and the army function independently and are not subject to civilian mandate. If they consider it necessary to kill, they kill you; if they don't, they don't. They are not subject to the rule of law.

Can you summarize for our readers the background to Castillo's election, and a bit about what it was like when he actually took office?

I would start by going back to 2016. That year, the left won the second-largest bench [delegation, bloc] in Congress. And in the popular vote, the left came in third place, and was very close to being number two.

"As soon as Castillo was elected, he started making concessions to the right."

The left members of parliament were elected in April, but unfortunately by December of that year, the bench of the left had a tragic, unprincipled split – not even over anything political, but just personality-based issues like who gets to be the spokesperson. So, the expectations of left-wing voters hoping to have a strong left that leads a government were gone. For five years after that split, the approach of the left members in Congress was essentially what Lenin criticized as "bourgeois parliamentarism": they were just proposing laws and laws and more laws, with a target of amending the constitution, but there was very little direct action, and very little in the way of a long-term project. It's like they thought that by changing words on paper you are going to get a revolution. In my view, that's just plain wrong. So, the leaders of the left who were elected in 2016 disappointed the voters.

That's when Pedro Castillo suddenly comes along and wins the election in 2021. He was already in first place in round one, with right-wing leader Keiko Fujimori in second place.

Pedro Castillo won because he was involved in workers' struggle and direct action in the streets. He

led two strikes of the teachers' union: a successful one in 2017, and one in 2018 that lost. Soon after that came COVID, and everything stopped. But Castillo was recognized instantly as the leader of the fierce teachers' union strikes, a leader of the left, of the poor. And with 19 percent of the popular vote, he got number one in the first round.

Now, 19 percent was the same portion of the vote that Frente Amplio got in 2016, when it came in third place. The difference is that, when Castillo ran, the right was so confident that they split into many small parties. They decimated themselves. So then the second round was a contest between left and right. That was one big difference compared to the 2016 elections, which was right vs. right in the second round.

So, Castillo arrived in government as a recognized leader of the left, not just due to his formal position, but mainly because he had been there in the streets leading very large strikes. That was how he ascended to the presidency. The problem is that as soon as Castillo was elected, he started making concessions to the right.

The first concession, which was very striking to me, was that he ratified Julio Velarde as president of the Central Bank, the same person who has been in charge since 2006, and who led an increase in inflation – an increase in the price of the dollar – and with that, an increase in the price of everything that is important in Peru. Castillo ratifying him was the first signal that he was trying to make some deal with the bourgeoisie. That was in June 2021.

The second important sign, for me, was that in the preparation of his first cabinet, in July, the two ministries with the largest budgets – Housing and Transport – were assigned to people who were complete unknowns, with no reputation whatsoever. And worse still, they didn't participate in any of the preparations for taking office; they just showed up on the day they were sworn in and that was it. But they were given huge budgets. That was the second signal that Castillo was doing something strange.

And the third sign – which is the last one I'll list, because after that there start to be too many to count – was that Frente Amplio was kicked out of the government. Frente Amplio had been in charge of one ministry – the Ministry of Production. So, that minister was removed at the beginning of October, and he was replaced by a person nominated by Acción Popular, which is a right-wing party.

It became clear that Pedro Castillo was making an alliance with the bourgeoisie in order to survive.



Pedro Castillo in 2021 as president supervised the start of works on the "Nueva Rinconada" drinking water and sewerage project in Villa Maria del Triunfo.

Photo: Presidencia Perú, tinyurl.com/castillo2021, Copyright: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/

Not in order to achieve anything for the people, not for any tangible goal that anyone could see, just to politically survive.

Can you explain a bit about the significance of having elected a president of indigenous descent in a country like Peru?

I wouldn't say that Pedro Castillo was elected primarily for being of indigenous descent. He was essentially elected for being a trade union leader and doing strikes. Teachers in the public schools are very low paid. So, he was a low-paid worker – not a high-paid worker like, say, Lula was in the steel industry. Also, he was a rural teacher, so he was not properly a peasant. Another characteristic to note is that he's not fluent in Quechua [the main indigenous language in Peru]. He understands some, but he was never fluent.

He was elected mainly because he represented the rural working poor. Of course, most of the poor and most of the rural people are also indigenous. But he never raised a flag of indigenous rights or a fight against racism; his electoral success was born out of the economic contradictions.

What were the political tensions like between Castillo and his cabinet? Why do you think there was so much reshuffling of cabinet members?

In the cabinet, there was no political program, and therefore no consistent basis for anything. People would just appear out of nowhere and become ministers. Inside the ministries, there were no public policies of any sort. On paper, there was a nice government plan that I helped write, but the government implemented absolutely none of it. We wrote a whole plan for nothing.

The reshuffling reflected Castillo's desperation to politically survive at all costs. At one point he installed a far-right prime minister that didn't last even a week. Why he did it remains a mystery. But in essence he displayed an eclectic, petit-bourgeois pattern of behavior. Castillo tried to survive without any political compass: he tried being left, he tried being right, but he had no political north.

What do you think were the underlying causes of the December 2022 coup, and what, if anything, do you think could have been done to prevent Castillo from being ousted?

My understanding, based on public info from someone who worked closely with Castillo, is that he believed on December 7 that he was going to get kicked out by the Congress that afternoon. And so he decided, "if I'm going to be kicked out, then I will do something magnificent in order to go out as a hero." And yes, he did something magnificent: he opened his mouth and said, "Congress is dissolved."



Protests on December 7, 2022, outside the Prefecture of Lima, where Pedro Castillo was detained.

Photo: Mayimbú, tinyurl.com/prefectura-protest-2022, Copyright: CC BY-SA 4.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en

It's classic Hegel – "spirit makes matter." He believed that he opened his mouth and things happened.

Imagine if, on that same December 7, he had instead said, "Today, Congress, at 3:00 pm, will decide if I am ousted; I invite the people of Peru to gather in the front hall of the Congress awaiting their answer." He could easily have gotten at least 50,000 people at the doors of Congress, and Congress wouldn't have dared to kick him out.

But to take that course of action, that would imply being a revolutionary. That implies having an approach of direct mass action. Castillo rejected direct action. He chose a petit-bourgeois approach: "I am going to do something that will be recorded in history." Yes, he's recorded in history – as a disaster! He was a rebel who seized state power for 80 minutes. That might be the shortest coup d'état in the history of the world. The special police that are the Peruvian equivalent of the US Secret Service, who were monitoring him, captured him immediately.

Here's an analogy I've used many times: Say you make a fake pistol out of wood, and you go to the bank and say, "This is an assault; give me all your money!" It's obvious to everyone in the bank that you're alone and your weapon is fake. So all ten employees at the bank jump on top of you and disarm you.

This is essentially what Pedro Castillo did. And his attempt was about as effective as the guy robbing the bank with the obviously wooden pistol. How did he come to this completely irrational decision? For me, the only explanation is the petit-bourgeois belief that personal effort is what conveys you to success. There is no concept of social action, mass action, collective action.

Given the political deficiencies you just mentioned, do you think that it was a mistake for Marxists to enter the Castillo government?

Well, the problem was that Castillo decided not to clash with Congress. I proposed that Castillo's should be a "war cabinet" that does not shy away from a head-on clash with Congress. And that we should be conscious of the fact that this clash would likely end in one of two ways: the executive branch dissolves the legislative branch, and we elect a new legislature, or else Congress ousts the president. So you have a large political contradiction, and you go in with open eyes about that, and you work with the concept of class struggle. For me, on that basis, entering the government as a Marxist is not a problem.

But the Castillo government did nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing that was significant to history – not a law, not even a proposal for a law. Nothing.

For example, the agreement Castillo made with us during the election was that on his first day in office, in his speech to the Congress, he would denounce the whole constitution, and he would call for a national assembly to make a new constitution. The legal proposal for it was already written, by Verónica Mendoza; all he had to do was introduce it.

But once actually in office? "No," he said, "it's not the time now; it's too radical." The classical petit-bourgeois reformist argument. Well, that was what he showed himself to be, and that's what he stayed – right up to the day he was kicked out.

"If [we made] one major mistake, it was not to right away start publicly criticizing Castillo's irrational decisions and failure to pursue the more militant approach he had promised."

As a member of Frente Amplio, I participated in the Castillo government with the idea that this was a government elected to represent the left side of the political spectrum; the people trusted this government, so we needed to participate. But if there was one major mistake, it was not to right away start publicly criticizing Castillo's irrational decisions and failure to pursue the more militant approach he had promised.

Instead of choosing a fighting course of action based on the class struggle, Castillo tried again and again to pacify the right wing, pacify the bourgeoisie, giving them whatever they asked for. And, of course, they kept asking, asking, asking for more – asking everything under the sun in order to preserve law and order. When you are elected as a leader of the left but your actions in the government are the same as the status quo, that's a clear contradiction.

Can you describe for us a bit about the character of the protests that have been going on in Peru since Castillo was ousted?

The protests are extremely disorganized. There is no leadership, there is no political party, there are not even any individuals who show up as leaders. It is just an absolute vacuum. You have a significant uprising, a lot of protests, but there is no real political leadership of any kind. And the people who pretend to be providing political leadership are just focused on bourgeois legality, not the movement:

trying to get a law passed to propose a new national assembly, to make a new constitution, to make a law to elect a new president, etc., and all within the bourgeois rules. To me, it's absolute nonsense.

From what I can tell, it seems like the popular protests have been mainly from the most oppressed layers of Peruvian society, but have not yet brought into struggle the "heavy battalions," so to speak, of the working class. Would you say that's accurate?

I would essentially agree with that. The COVID pandemic here in Peru decimated and broke up the working class. The lack of trade union organization is just horrible, even by US standards. So, we are a very backward society, very split, very fractured. Especially given the failure of the Castillo leadership – and, even more important for me, the previous failure of Frente Amplio in 2016, splitting not even a year after the elections – we need a new leadership, from scratch.

So, the real state of the movement against the Boluarte regime is that it's a spontaneous movement. There are complaints, protests; but there is no leadership, no final target. There is no construction of organization. And without organization, everything is just hanging in thin air.

Are there any lessons that the left and workers' movements internationally should be drawing out of the experience in Peru?

You need organization; you need to build a party. Without organization, you go nowhere. Because if by any chance you get a position in the executive or legislative branch, and you don't have an organization, don't have direct action, then you are gone, you are dead. For me, the essential lesson is: build an organization.

Also, find methods of organizing that allow for renewal of the organization's leadership, so you don't have one perpetual leader. For example, now in Latin America, it's "Evo Morales forever." Conceptually, it's the same as Stalin. Or Lula in Brazil, conceptually it's the same. There are no new leaders, there is no organization, there is no ideology; there's just a cult of personality. One of the things that we have learned is that we are against the cult of personality. And a cult of personality is what we've had with Fidel Castro, then Lula, then Evo Morales, then Chavez, but he died, and then you have a new cult with Maduro. And Ortega is the extreme case of the cult of personality. So, there is no organization, no genuine leadership, no renewal of leaders. And that categorically guarantees a disaster. ■

reform & revolution

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