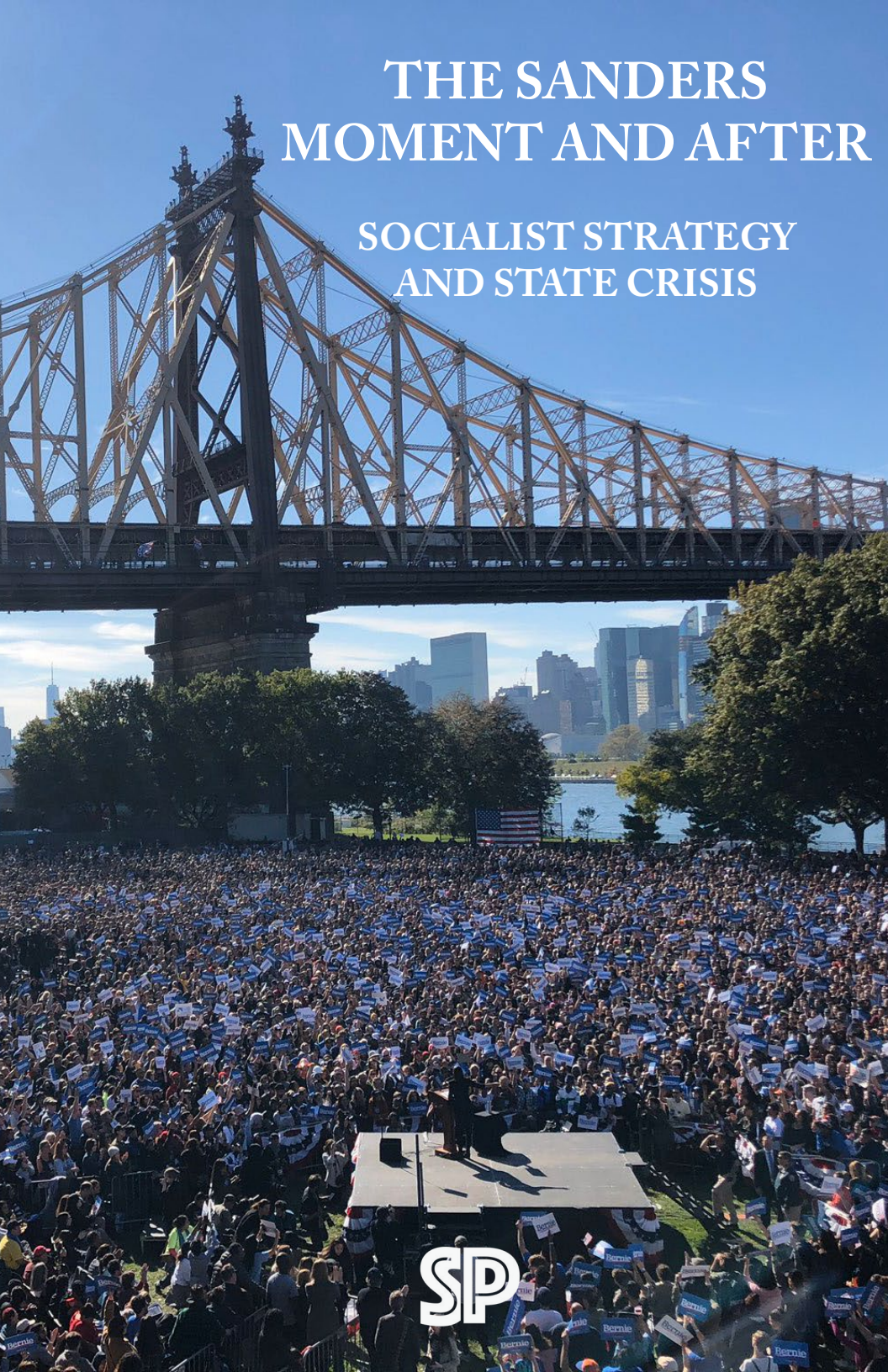


THE SANDERS MOMENT AND AFTER

SOCIALIST STRATEGY AND STATE CRISIS



SP

The Sanders Moment and After: Socialist Strategy and State Crisis

Edited by Stephen Maher and Rafael Khachaturian.

Layout by Niko Block.

Published October 2020 by the Socialist Project
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

socialistproject.ca

THE SANDERS MOMENT AND AFTER

Socialist Strategy and State Crisis

From the Streets to the State and Back Again: Learning From the Sanders Moment <i>Stephen Maher and Rafael Khachaturian</i>	6
---	---

I. THE POLITICAL CRISIS

Working Classes and the Rise of the New Right: Socialist Politics in the Era of Trump <i>Socialist Project</i>	18
--	----

Accountable Capitalism or Democratic Socialism? <i>Stephen Maher</i>	24
---	----

Why is There Now Socialism in the United States? <i>Ingar Solty</i>	34
--	----

II. ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS

By Party or By Formation <i>Seth Adler</i>	43
---	----

The American Left Resurgent: Prospects and Tensions <i>Rafael Khachaturian and Sean Guillory</i>	62
--	----

Search for a Mass Politics: The DSA Beyond Bernie <i>Sarah Mason and Robert Cavooris</i>	79
--	----

Three Measures Against Racist Policing <i>April M. Short</i>	92
---	----

III. NEW LABOUR FORMATIONS

The Political Revolution Goes to Work <i>Jane Slaughter</i>	105
--	-----

Teachers' Strikes: A New Class Politics Emerging <i>Eric Blanc</i>	116
---	-----

Green New Deals: Climate Movements and Labour Unions	126
<i>Alleen Brown with Jane McAlevey</i>	

IV. SOCIAL CRISES

Global Capitalism, Global Pandemic, and the Struggle for Socialism	132
<i>Stephen Maher and Rafael Khachaturian</i>	

Racism, COVID-19, and the Fight for Economic Justice	142
<i>Marty Hart-Lansberg</i>	

The California Disaster: What is the Link Between Wildfires and the Coronavirus?	150
<i>Christoph Hermann</i>	

Political Openings: Class Struggle During and After the Pandemic	156
<i>Sam Gindin</i>	

About the Socialist Project	175
-----------------------------	-----

Note on the Text

Citations for these articles can be found in their online versions.

We also wish to thank the photographers whose images are featured here for licensing their work under creative commons.

FROM THE STREETS TO THE STATE AND BACK AGAIN

Learning From the Sanders Moment

Stephen Maher and Rafael Khachaturian

The essays gathered in this collection were written in the midst of an escalating and multifaceted crisis situation in the United States. They address the search for a socialist politics in a highly uncertain period during which the legitimacy – if not the structural persistence – of neoliberalism came under increasing strain.

During that time, Bernie Sanders' campaigns were seen as an apparent breakthrough for the left, allowing the widespread delegitimation of neoliberal ideology to be expressed within the parameters of the party system. Their failure compels socialists to return to difficult organizational and strategic questions – and the answers are as uncertain as ever. As contemporary analyses of this period, these essays both shed light on the forces that led to the present conjuncture, and illustrate the political and organizational challenges that are relevant in the post-Sanders moment.

The promise of Sanders spoke to a generation that came of age after the “anti-globalization movement” of the 1990s had come and gone, appearing to transcend hollow slogans about “changing the world without taking power.” Although Occupy Wall Street created important political and ideological space in the context of the economic fallout of the Recession, its suppression by the authorities as suddenly as it emerged onto the political scene a mere two months later left little if any organized infrastructure behind.

The limits of what had been accomplished through mass demonstrations alone was apparent to those who came out of the recession facing a precarious future, with lowered standards of living, eroding social protections, growing state surveillance and repression, and a rapidly intensifying ecological crisis.

For this new generation of activists and organizers, Sanders' upstart 2016 campaign appeared to be a viable route to claiming



Sanders in Des Moines, Iowa.
Gage Skidmore, 2019.

a part of state power. Following Sanders in unabashedly proclaiming themselves ‘democratic socialists’, these activists flocked to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), transforming it practically overnight from what was effectively a grassroots progressive caucus within the Democratic Party into a vehicle for a left politics still to be defined.

Some of Sanders’ more ambitious supporters saw his campaign as the first step in an eventual “dirty break” from the Democratic Party. According to this strategy, socialists would run as Democrats for national, state, and municipal offices. These campaigns would serve as vehicles for strengthening the bonds between democratic socialists in office, on the one hand, and community organizers and rank-and-file trade union activists, on the other. Ultimately, it was argued, this would create the base for an autonomous socialist party and a split from the Democratic Party. Given the stranglehold of the two corporate parties on electoral politics, this seemed to offer the best path to a viable mass socialist party.

From the Polls to the Streets

Sanders' failure to secure the nomination in 2016, and again in 2020, cast doubt on this strategy in the eyes of many. To be sure, the magnitude of the defeat this represented was often overstated, as important electoral victories for democratic socialists across the country at the state and local level has clearly attested. Nevertheless, there was a marked lack of clarity around when and how a 'dirty break' would be executed, and weak structures of democratic accountability between DSA-endorsed candidates elected to office and their organizational basis.

In addition, despite the invocation of Andre Gorz's concept of "non-reformist reforms" – whereby an accumulation of reforms would pave the way toward more radical social change – the concrete steps from expanding programs for social provision to a deeper, revolutionary transformation was never clearly elaborated.

In the spring of 2020, shortly after Sanders suspended his campaign, a mass wave of urban uprisings on a scale not seen since the 1960s swept the country in response to police brutality and the state coercion of black and brown working class people – which had become part and parcel of neoliberal urban governance. Despite putting forward his own plan for police reform, Sanders' inability to play a leading role in these mass mobilizations seemed to further underscore the revival of street protest as the best path toward social change, and the limits of working "within and against" the Democratic Party. The size of the demonstrations, the breadth of support they claimed, and their militant and radical nature has cast further doubt on the new socialists' electoral strategy.

Some have taken these mobilizations as an indication of a deep crisis of the ruling class, or even signaling the beginning of a prolonged insurrectionary moment. Yet beyond the footage of burning police precincts and "autonomous zones" remains a deeply-entrenched two-party system which is supported by a capitalist class that has shown no sign of the kinds of splits or crises that would indicate anything like a revolutionary opening. None of the political forces currently on the scene seem capable of offering a serious alternative to the basic trajectory of neoliberal globalization, however ideologically discredited this has become.

While the neoliberal center has consolidated its control over the Democratic Party, growing tendencies toward open fascism are

apparent in the rhetoric of Donald Trump as well as in the structures and practices within the coercive apparatus of the state. These were clearly visible, for instance, in the rapid deployments by federal and state governments in response to the urban rebellions, as well as in the mobilization of various paramilitary groups that were apparently connected with them. But the consolidation of ruling class power around a hardening of the state and “law and order” has been advanced by both parties – albeit in different ways. This again presents the basic dilemma of how to move beyond street protests to break the deadlock of the two-party system.

Beyond the Two-Party Deadlock?

The pieces presented here trace how the convergence of these novel forces has its roots in the 2008 financial crisis. That moment sparked new challenges to the hegemonic alliance between the neoconservative Republican and neoliberal Democratic forces – both in the form of the nativist Tea Party and the progressive Occupy movement. At the time, those twin pressures from left and right indicated growing ideological divergences both within and between the respective parties. The critical question now is where these conflicts within the two parties stand today – both in the form of ongoing tension within the Republican Party between Trump and what remains of the old establishment, on the one hand, and the Democrats’ successful squelching of Sanders’ “political revolution,” on the other.

Positioning itself directly against the Obama-Clinton Democratic Party and new social movements like #BlackLivesMatter, the first Trump campaign took advantage of the growing legitimacy crisis to secure an unexpected win. Bolstered by the explicitly counter-majoritarian institutions of the American constitutional order – winning via the Electoral College despite a significant defeat in the popular vote, and governing in conjunction with Republican control of the Senate and the courts – Trump has succeeded to a large extent in bringing previously marginal far-right tendencies front and center within the GOP and creating space for fascist mobilization at the grassroots. Trump’s victory has also created intense contradictions within the state apparatuses, his feud against the “deep state” being just one example.

The perpetuation of neoliberal hegemony depends, in part, on the stabilization of the two-party system through polarization and

negative partisanship between Republicans and Democrats. To that extent, Trump has exacerbated the dynamic of negative partisanship, with the “first past the post” electoral system reinforcing the party duopoly and driving partisan voters further apart into their respective camps. Yet this has also led to a situation where, alongside their deeper entrenchment, the parties’ effectiveness as mechanisms of legitimation has become increasingly volatile and riven by internal conflicts and pressures. Thus, we are dealing with a paradox, where growing ideological distance between the parties further entrenches them in the state institutional complex, even while representing a threat to the ultimate stability of the constitutional order as a whole.

However, it is also crucial to emphasize that, regardless of the outcome of the ideological struggle underway within the two parties, the institutional strength and entrenched neoliberal structure of contemporary capitalism, which underpins the party system, remains. Despite their sharp ideological differences, both parties have upheld a shared commitment to the project of global economic integration under American leadership. If Trump has threatened this in certain respects, so far he has been unwilling to challenge capital to the extent that would be necessary to substantially break with neoliberal order.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has sent a further shock wave through the entire social formation. It has underscored the deep-rooted social inequalities cultivated by forty years of neoliberal policy, prioritizing the rapid commodification of essential social goods, maintaining austerity, and rolling back welfare state programs, all the while eroding state logistical and planning capacities in line with the “New Public Management.” The United States’ lack of social protections, with basic health care tethered to employment, has put essential workers especially at risk. Along with prompting a broader crisis of social reproduction linked to both elder and child care, COVID has also exacerbated divisions between working class professionals and service and manual workers – even as the former now also find themselves in increasingly precarious positions.

The possibility that a Democratic administration, along with possible control over one or even both houses of Congress, will return to the neoliberal policies which generated the crisis in the first place – or even turn to austerity in the wake of the huge deficits created during the COVID crisis – would intensify its legitimacy

crisis once again. This, of course, would also further mobilize the Republican far-right.

While the Republican establishment may have once believed they could control this dynamic, it has now become a breeding ground of neo-fascist radicalization. Even though much of the ruling class today seems to desire a return to neoliberal normalcy in the face of Trump's chaos, this could easily shift as the ideological strength of the far-right builds and the means of state legitimation, including elections, become increasingly disorganized and turbulent. The longer the coronavirus crisis persists, exacerbated by waves of political unrest and ecological catastrophe in the forms of hurricanes, fires, and droughts, the more capital will be tempted to swing to the right as a means to resolve the legitimacy crisis and justify an increasing turn to authoritarianism.

Here, the formidable repressive institutions of the American state – its police forces, national guardsmen, military, and the massive carceral apparatus that undergirds them – in tandem with “independent” militias, may yet become the staging grounds for an even more indiscriminate and concentrated far-right offensive on all shades of the left than has taken place so far.



Joe Flood, 2020.

The Search for a Socialist Organizational Form

From Occupy to Sanders to the present uprisings, the strategic dialectic of the left over the past decade has swung from the streets to the state, and back to the streets. These oscillations reflect the disorganization and disorientation of left forces, which have been unable to regroup or break through the basic impasse presented by the entrenchment of the two-party system. The decomposition and fragmentation of the left has been reflected in the defeat of the working class and its organizations over the neoliberal period. Whether or not this can be reversed remains an open question, as does whether the ephemerality of street protests can be channelled into a systemic, popular challenge to capitalism absent a robust and vibrant trade union movement.

If the Sanders moment suggested that a truly mass socialist politics was possible in the United States, it also pointed to the underlying limits of how far this could go without a much more substantial organization, with much deeper roots in working class communities. As the attention of the left again turns from the state to the streets, we are forced to confront the question of whether the Sanders campaign actually succeeded in creating political infrastructure capable of outlasting his electoral campaigns. This question, too, remains an open one.

DSA's growth can be attributed, in part, to Sanders' rhetorical popularization of the "democratic socialism" label. But perhaps just as importantly, what has distinguished it from similar small organizations with roots in the New Left is its ideological flexibility, "big tent" multi-tendency organizational structure, and comparatively low threshold to entry and membership. In that sense, for many millennial activists who became politicized after the social movements of the Obama years, DSA provided a convenient alternative to the more onerous task of building a new organization from scratch.

DSA grew in part because it was there, and appeared to offer a vehicle to articulate a new socialist vision that was not beholden to the legacies of either the old or new left. Yet this flexibility also created no shortage of ideological confusion, as well as difficulties in carrying out unified national political education, strategizing, and action. The openness to moving beyond emulations of the Bolshevik experience a century ago often led to the opposite identification of socialism with the New Deal or the European welfare state. In this

way, some of the democratic socialist activists tended to overlook the inadequacies of postwar social democracy – which had been painfully revealed by decades of neoliberal restructuring.

Indeed, the fact that the New Deal never developed into a European-style welfare state threw into sharp relief the ambiguities and contradictions involved in much of the left, following Sanders, claiming Roosevelt's mantle. Like European social democracy, the New Deal never aspired to fundamentally transform the state or transcend capitalist property relations. As a result, these gains were susceptible to being whittled away by the pressures of a globalizing capitalism

If the Sanders moment suggested that a truly mass socialist politics was possible in the United States, it also pointed to the underlying limits of how far this could go without a much more substantial organization.

and working class defeat and demobilization. This mixed legacy was powerfully illustrated by the fact that both an avowed socialist like Sanders and an avowed “capitalist” like Elizabeth Warren could both draw on the New Deal's legacy and frame their agendas as completing Roosevelt's project.

If all this suggested how much deeper a socialist transition would have to be than providing Medicare for All, it also pointed to the scale of the transformation that would be required in the most prominent legacy of the New Deal: the trade unions themselves. This was clear from the labor movement's response to Bernie's two campaigns, with few honorable exceptions and despite the tenacity of rank-and-file activists. Indeed, given the limited political horizons of the trade unions today, it can hardly be said that declining union density alone accounts for the neoliberal restructuring of recent decades.

Thus simply aiming to increase union membership doesn't address the question of what kind of unions we are trying to build. Transforming unions into spaces for class formation and militant organizing requires creating democratic unions that aim to build the workers' capacities and promote class solidarity, rather than pursu-

ing narrow bargaining interests of specific sectors. Building linkages between workers in different sectors necessary to accomplish this is the crucial task of a socialist organization.

Base-Building for the Political Revolution

This lack of support among unions was a crucial deficit in the base for Sanders' "political revolution." Though poll after poll pointed to a public that felt favorably toward his supposedly 'radical' platform, Sanders' campaign was unable to parlay this into the mobilization necessary to win – let alone into what would have been required to implement this agenda in the face of opposition from both Democrats and Republicans.

Already showing concerning signs that the political revolution was not producing the absolute voter turnout expected, and with

The fact that the Sanders campaigns were able to advance as far as they did is more indicative of the organizational and ideological weakness of the Democratic Party, rather than the strength of the left mobilized behind Sanders.

Sanders' gains among young and minority voters being offset by the higher turnout among moderate suburbanites, the campaign was additionally caught off guard by the rapid coalescence of the center behind Biden. Compounding the problem was the coronavirus shutdown, prompting calls for

party unity and the suspension of the campaign rather than the possibility of a contested convention.

The fact that the Sanders campaigns were able to advance as far as they did is more indicative of the organizational and ideological weakness of the Democratic Party, rather than the strength of the left mobilized behind Sanders. If the coming together of the center around Joe Biden showed an impressive ability for the establishment to protect itself in the face of a socialist challenge, the sheer contingency of this – in terms of the lack of institutional mechanisms for systematically disciplining progressive upstarts – and the difficulty in executing such an exceptional maneuver also highlighted open-

ings and possibilities.

There are certainly gains to be made by working on the Democratic ballot line, both in terms of the broader promotion of left ideas and the advocacy of social and environmental measures to mitigate the present crises. One possible implication of waging electoral campaigns at the state and local levels is that socialists could plausibly form a new “progressive” caucus within the Democratic Party’s larger coalitional ecology. Yet in the absence of more substantial base-building among trade unions and working class communities, and a strong coterie of socialists in office at the local, state, and national levels prepared to execute a split, it is likely that the socialist left will either remain embedded within the framework of the Democratic Party or on the margins of the political field.

While the Democratic establishment may be more than happy to use the presence of socialists to reestablish the party’s legitimacy, its proximity to capital and lack of any structures of bottom-up accountability makes it extremely difficult to imagine seriously challenging the party’s basic neoliberal orientation from within.

In this context of left weakness, centrist retrenchment, and far-right offensive, the old dichotomy between reformist and revolutionary roads to state power is no longer the pertinent question. As DSA reorients itself away from the Sanders campaigns and toward the current wave of mass uprisings, it is important to develop a strategy that learns from the experience of the Sanders’ campaigns – both their successes and limitations.

Among the most important lessons of the Sanders moment is the continued importance of searching for, and building, an organizational form capable of articulating the political agency of a currently weak and fragmented working class. Such an organization must be able to effectively mediate between the street and the state, and articulate the energies of street protests and the small pockets of independent labor agitation to the electoral gains of the previous four years.

Whether the DSA is the organizational terrain on which this political project will unfold remains to be seen. Until now, its political strategy and tactics have been based on fusing the electoral road with extra-parliamentary struggles and movements, all the while attempting to develop an organizational identity as more than a Democratic pressure group – but not quite a party. Yet the two-party

deadlock means it now faces a new dilemma: avoiding both coalescing into a left caucus within the Democratic Party, or riding another cycle of protest and subsequent demobilization.

Despite their significance, the current mass protests have not articulated a strategy capable of transcending the limits of Occupy, nor the subsequent Trump-era protest movements like the Women's March and the demonstrations against the "Muslim ban." Similarly, those advocating for a dirty break from the Democratic Party remain at great risk of absorption by its institutional inertia – particularly in the absence of a clear plan for organizing and executing this split, let alone bridging between moderate reforms and eventual socialist transition.

Perhaps because of this ambiguity, the relationship between electoral politics and base building has remained undeveloped, being largely improvised during both an unraveling political crisis and the unexpected growth of a socialist left that occasionally seemed unsure of what to do with its new prominence.

Given the ongoing entrenchment of the neoliberal model, overcoming these dilemmas and building a truly mass socialist politics demands learning the right lessons from the Sanders moment: the need for a renewed focus on base building to develop organizational capacities both outside and within institutions like the Democratic Party; to transform trade unions from sectoral bargaining vehicles to mechanisms of class-formation; and to cultivate deeper and more substantial roots in working class communities for socialist politics.

Only by building a mass base and experimenting with new organizational forms can the new socialist movement hope to gain the institutional traction to become a viable alternative to ecological chaos, immiseration, and far-right authoritarianism. •

Stephen Maher is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at Ontario Tech University, and Assistant Editor of the Socialist Register. Rafael Khachaturian (@rafkbach) is a lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania and faculty at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research.

Part I.

THE POLITICAL CRISIS

WORKING CLASSES AND THE RISE OF THE NEW RIGHT

Socialist Politics in the Era of Trump

The Socialist Project

The success of xenophobic right-wing political forces today calls for the development of a socialist praxis fit for this perilous political moment. Taking this seriously requires that we address the inroads of the far right into working class constituencies that were bastions of trade unionism for much of the 20th century, and traditionally voted heavily not only for New Deal Democrats, or Labour and Social Democratic parties on the centre-left but even, as in France, for Communist parties.

The political conjuncture inaugurated in 2016 in the imperial centres of global capitalism, first with the UK's break with the European Union initiated by the Brexit referendum and then the "America First" patriotic chauvinism that accompanied the election of a political scoundrel like Donald Trump, reflects deepening contradictions in neoliberalism. We should not however expect that the actual practices of global neoliberalism are about to end with this new political conjuncture. Rhetoric aside, thus far the essential orientation of both Trump's and Theresa May's politics has been toward hard-right market-building sustained by broad state support for an even more unfettered movement of capital.

The New Conjuncture

What is distinctive about the new conjuncture is rather the growing *delegitimation* of the key institutional supports of neoliberal hegemony, which have sponsored the making of global capitalism under its ideological auspices. This stretches from the bureaucracies of the European Union, the IMF, and the WTO and, in the context of the Trump presidency, to possibly even the US Treasury and Federal Reserve, whose capacity to manage the economic contradictions of capitalist globalization will be severely challenged. This will be exac-

erbated by the difficulties of managing its ecological contradictions, which can only mount amidst such reactionary Trumpisms as the deregulation of the US coal industry and the defunding of fresh water restoration in the Great Lakes.

The most visible expression of this institutional crisis is the delegitimation of all the political parties of the centre-left and centre-right that promoted neoliberal globalization. But it is important to note that this is not a matter of the ideology promoting capitalist globalization having only recently and suddenly become unpopular. It is enough to recall the resonance of the opposition to the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement among working class people in the mid-late 1980s and that it was in the USA itself shortly thereafter that NAFTA had the most difficulty in getting passed. The repeated defeat of the proposed neoliberal changes to the EU constitution in those countries which put them to referendums indicated this same opposition as well.

That it took so long for the unpopularity of neoliberal globalization to be registered at the level of a political crisis is an indication of how limited the electoral options are in capitalist democracies, to say nothing of the degree to which corporate media consistently reproduces bourgeois ideology. That working class discontent with capitalist globalization, after all the terrible effects of three decades of neoliberal restructuring, should now find expression in the form of growing support for the xenophobic right is a sorry testament to the bankruptcy of the parties of the centre-left, and the unions that support them.

Working class communities have been devastated as precarity has increased, wages have stagnated, and the welfare state has been dismantled. Increasing capital mobility as trade barriers have been dropped and regulatory apparatuses harmonized and integrated within transnational governance structures, has led to a process of “deindustrialization” in the core countries while also pushing states to attract investment by keeping labour costs low and environmental protections weak. Moreover, “free trade agreements” have locked states into neoliberal restructuring and further eroded democracy, rolling back state apparatuses supporting workers while rolling out those necessary to manage the globalization of capital. The social dislocation this has produced further discredited those elements of the social democratic embrace of neoliberal ideology that advanced

the making of global capitalism.

The political collapse of the center-left and the forces most closely associated with it has created important political openings for the radical left, especially in the form of new parties like Podemos, Syriza, and the Left Bloc in addition to insurgencies around Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders inside old ones. But there can be no mistaking how wide an opening this has also created for the far-right, not least in working class communities whose own precarity has left them vulnerable to a politics of resentment. This especially became the case as the parties they had traditionally supported shifted away from a reformist class politics to a meritocratic identity politics.

Whereas the old class politics demanded universalistic welfare state protections, collective service provisions and egalitarian income redistribution, the new politics the neoliberal parties of the centre-left emphasized merely sought greater equality of opportunity for individuals belonging to socially marginalized groups, aiming to produce equal representation in scaling the ladders of success in capitalist societies. This has had the effect of playing up mobility and meritocracy for the best and brightest, while playing down universal collective services in education, transit, health and reproduction, and other decommodified public goods which would have the most egalitarian effect, and be of greatest benefit to working class people in all of their diversities of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, region, religion and citizenship status. The focus of politics narrowed to particularistic questions of inclusion within corporate capitalism.

The Scoundrels of the New Right

The resentment which the political scoundrels of the new right have fanned in this context – combining patriotic nationalist anti-globalization rhetoric with explicit as well as implicit xenophobic, anti-feminist, homophobic and racist messages – has displayed a broad appeal that cuts across the various identity groups that compose working class communities, and is by no means confined to male white individuals within them. Amidst the strong currents of socio-economic turmoil, it is the crosscutting nature of these messages, interweaving patriarchy, homophobia, sexism and racism with nostalgia about how everything and everyone was once in its place, which explains why even Trump could get substantial support

among communities of recent immigrants. To treat the election of Trump as a simple effect of white racism or sexism is to seriously misdiagnose the current political moment. With Bernie Sanders sidelined by the Democratic Party, Trump appealed to a surprisingly diverse range of working people as the only viable political force capable of articulating their anxieties and anger.

No doubt, Trump has drawn on racism that is deeply rooted in American society, acknowledging the effects of neoliberalism on workers while projecting this antagonism onto a racialized 'Other'. But efforts to address this racism that fail to place it in the context of class conflict risk fuelling Trump's reactionary politics of resentment. Insisting, for instance, that white workers whose lives have been wrecked by neoliberal restructuring are beneficiaries of the 'white supremacy' of this system leaves the space open for these workers to identify with the political forces of the far-right, which insist that these whites are in no way 'privileged.' In the face of necessary equity policies to address systemic social inequalities (that can't be overturned by 'individualized' policies), the far right conjures a fable that these workers are actually victimized by a racial redistribution of resources overseen by a globalized, politically correct, liberal elite. The far right potentially becomes the most visible political force able to register the anxiety and anger of these workers.

The barely-coded racism of Trump's promise to 'Make America Great Again' has led to a welcome resurgence of anti-racist and pro-feminist organizing. This must always be a central aspect of socialist politics, worldview, and daily practice, especially vis-a-vis the working classes. As Lenin put it at the beginning of the 20th century in *What Is To Be Done?*:

"Working class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of political tyranny, oppression and abuse no matter *what class* is affected ... unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis of all aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population."

This could only take root through socialists developing the capacity "to organize sufficiently wide, striking, and rapid exposures of all the shameful outrages... to bring before the working masses prompt exposures on all possible issues... to deepen, expand and

intensify political exposures and political agitation.”

The point is, we need a socialist politics that embraces yet transcends identity politics through making universal claims for social as well as environmental justice, for decommodified social services, for better wages and working conditions. An anti-racist politics needs to emerge directly from struggles that address the material conditions by which we produce, distribute, and consume. Only in that way will we be able to transcend the debilitating ‘guilting’ rhetoric so prevalent on the left today. Only in that way will we be able to transcend the tendency, even in today’s trade unions, to address class issues in identity-representational terms rather than on the basis of universal claims.

The political significance of the far right in the current political conjuncture must make us sensitive to the danger of an imminent closure of the democratic space upon which the left depends to develop and grow, and which indeed makes socialist working class organizing possible. This raises the question of a ‘popular front’ strategy, whereby socialists’ political activism would be thrown behind liberal forces facing an existential challenge to their hegemony from a neo-fascist right. The magnitude of this far-right threat suggests that socialists should support those forces seeking to defend liberal democratic institutions against any and all moves to foreclose the freedoms they support.

But we must not lose sight of the need to build the socialist movements and form political alliances and fronts, so tragically absent amidst the traumas of neoliberalism, capable of reinvigorating class struggles, of confronting corporate power and the capitalist class, of addressing the environmental and social as well as economic and political crises of our time. The capacity to envision and push forward the serious, bold programs to fundamentally transform and democratize the state we so urgently need can only emerge through this process of struggle and organization. •

This article was originally published on June 27, 2017, at socialistproject.ca/2017/06/b1439/.



The anti-Trump women's march in Washington DC. Ted Eytan, 2017.

ACCOUNTABLE CAPITALISM OR DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM?

Stephen Maher



Elizabeth Warren at a rally in Arlington, Virginia. Hillel Steinberg, 2020.

Elizabeth Warren’s “Accountable Capitalism Act” promises the most radical shift in economic power since the New Deal. It contains four essential components, including campaign finance regulations, an attempt to limit corporate “short-termism” that has supposedly accompanied the rise of finance, and a requirement that corporations serve the “public benefit” rather than just shareholders. Most substantial, however, is the proposal that employees play an enlarged role in electing corporate boards of directors. As Seth Ackerman argued in calling for the left to “take Elizabeth Warren literally, but not seriously,” the Act would in some respects be a step toward greater democratic control of the economy.

Yet even aside from Warren’s proud declaration that “I am a

capitalist,” there are many reasons to regard the bill with skepticism. Indeed, given that it is modeled partly on the German social democratic model, the experience of workers in that country – who have increasingly been forced to accept wage restraint in one of the harshest neoliberal regimes in the world – should itself serve as a warning. Developing a clear understanding of the limits of Warren’s proposal can be helpful in forming the vision of economic and political democracy that should be at the center of the current “democratic socialist” upsurge in the United States. Even if unachievable today, is Warren’s vision what democratic socialists should struggle for?

Congress could never enact Warren’s bill absent a massive working-class mobilization and a major shift in the balance of forces. Even aside from this, the most substantial proposals, those around corporate governance, are aimed not at empowering workers but rather non-financial corporate executives. Indeed, the bill appears rooted in the familiar false dichotomy between “finance” and the “real economy.” The rise of finance is not a cancerous growth on the otherwise healthy body of capitalism, but rather a component of the capitalist globalization of recent decades.

Moreover, while the restructuring of capitalism makes it impossible to simply turn back the clock to the 1950s, postwar managerialism was in any case no less ruthlessly committed to profit maximization than contemporary neoliberalism – though workers were able to maintain rising standards of living through unionization. Similarly, the proposition that corporations act in the “public benefit” sounds good, but in reality this “stakeholder capitalism” leads to the same single-minded focus on profit that it claims to challenge.

In the end, were it to be enacted, the Accountable Capitalism Act could actually be a barrier to working-class consciousness, embedding workers even more deeply within the logic of capitalism and identifying their interests more closely with corporate profitability.

Managerialism and Neoliberalism

Even if they have always been geared toward maximizing profit and outcompeting rivals, corporations have not always looked the same. The corporation was born when investment bankers like J.P. Morgan in the nineteenth century merged small businesses into larger

and more efficient firms. These bankers exercised power by acquiring seats on the boards of directors of the firms they controlled, creating networks of interlocking directorates. The decline of these investment banks meant that corporations were increasingly autonomous, and under the control of professional managers. Investors in this era of “managerialism” had little ability to challenge the power of internal managers, who were able to subordinate boards of directors. Of course, these new corporate organizations were just as dedicated to profit maximization as their forbearers had been – and indeed were perhaps even more effective in pursuing this goal.

Yet in the neoliberal period, stockholdings have again been concentrated in the financial sector, increasing the power of outside investors to discipline management. Warren’s prescriptions are predicated on the idea that investors have used this power to impose a “short-term” perspective on the managers of non-financial firms, who are now forced to look for a quick buck at the expense of long-term prosperity. Unlike in the earlier managerial period, Warren writes, “the obsession with maximizing shareholder returns effectively means America’s biggest companies have dedicated themselves to making the rich even richer.” This, she argues has been primarily responsible for the increasing social inequality, economic stagnation, and declining wages of the neoliberal period.

Warren claims that financial pressure has led managers to effectively loot their companies by diverting capital from useful investment to “buying back” shares of their company’s stock to manipulate the price. As a result, “good jobs” are disappearing and corporate investment has become a simple matter of handing out money to the super rich. This underinvestment means companies are “setting themselves up to fail.” And given that managers are often compensated with stock, they have every incentive to perpetuate the irrational cycle.

To remedy this, Warren proposes preventing managers and directors from selling shares within five years of receiving them, or within three years of executing a buyback. She also suggests issuing federal corporate charters requiring firms to act as “benefit corporations,” serving a range of stakeholders – including workers, consumers, and communities – rather than just shareholders. By increasing the autonomy of managers from investor discipline, corporations will supposedly again engage in the kind of investment that gener-

ated the “good jobs” and rising standards of living that characterized the managerial period. She also proposes granting employees the right to elect 40 percent of corporate boards of directors in order to “give workers a stronger voice in corporate decision-making at large companies.”

To be sure, the rise of finance in the neoliberal period was accompanied by greater pressure to cut costs and increase margins by offshoring production, subcontracting out work, and laying off workers. But these trends were not simply the result of financial parasitism. Rather, this restructuring was rooted in the increasing global mobility of capital, which intensified competitive pressures between firms as well as countries and the workers living within them for investment and jobs.

Managers of non-financial corporations relied on international finance to integrate the global economy and circulate capital all over the planet, helping to resolve the 1970s profitability crisis by opening vast low-wage workforces of the peripheral states to exploitation. They also counted on finance to facilitate globalization by managing the risks associated with world trade, especially through derivatives trading after the final abandonment of the gold standard in 1971. So, too, do these non-financial corporate managers depend upon financial firms to finance mergers and acquisitions, and to maintain consumption in the context of the stagnant wages that have been a primary feature of neoliberalism. All this shows just how deeply entwined the financial sector is with the “productive” economy – and how essential it is to global capitalism.

There is good reason to doubt the idea that the rise of finance has been associated with increasing economic “short-termism.” Rather than executives looting their companies, stock buybacks are more likely the result of historically high profits and low interest rates than supposed corporate irrationality. With corporations sitting piles of cash, and borrowing extremely cheap, why not distribute wealth to shareholders? This also means buybacks have not necessarily come at the expense of investment, which remains at historically normal levels relative to GDP. The problems with this argument are particularly clear in the case of the tech companies, which forego short-term profits to develop the technologies to secure market dominance well into the future. The same long-term perspective is evident when General Motors invests in China and

Mexico, building fixed capital infrastructure, brand recognition, and political relationships to control markets and reduce input costs. In fact, management tenures are actually up.

Neither is there any clear reason to associate finance with a fundamental short-term perspective. An estimated 75 per cent of the value of Amazon, for example, is “justified by profits that are expected to be made a decade or more from now,” which makes for “the biggest bet in history on a company’s long-term prospects.” Indeed, since the crisis there has been a historic shift to passively managed investment funds – which hold shares “indefinitely.”

Either way, Warren’s act aims not at empowering workers but restoring managerial predominance. As an editorial by Jesse Fried in the *Financial Times* pointed out, “when 40 per cent of a company’s board consists of managers or their indirect reports” as required by Warren’s proposal, “investors would need to win almost every other seat to wrest control from incumbent management.” Workers notoriously almost always side with management in conflicts with outsiders. Indeed this was precisely why some of the largest firms encouraged employee stock ownership during the managerial era, alongside strategies to split stocks whenever the share price rose above a certain level: such measures were intended to prevent the emergence of an oppositional bloc of investors that could challenge management.

Especially in the wake of the extreme financial concentration of the post-crisis period, boards have again become key battlegrounds. Activist investors like Nelson Peltz have taken stakes companies like Johnson & Johnson and GE, demanding Board seats to push reforms on often-reluctant management – even forcing the retirement of General Electric CEO Jeff Immelt. But throughout the neoliberal period, managers have engaged in futile efforts to defend themselves from financial pressure by setting up anti-takeover defenses in the form of golden parachutes, poison pills, and state regulations. Warren’s plan (were it implemented) might actually succeed in giving them the protection they have sought.

Contrary to those emphasizing the supposed corrupting influence of financial “short-termism,” the rising living standards and robust economic growth of the “Golden Age” of capitalism rested on more than merely a specific model of corporate governance. It also depended upon relatively high union density. Without this, com-

petitive pressure to allocate capital as efficiently as possible within firms as well as across the economy as a whole would mean that downward pressure on wages would continue to produce economic inequality and precarity. Firms seeking to raise capital need to be able to promise a return. This, in the end, is the primary objective of all corporate management strategies. Though individual managers may have different visions for how to achieve it, that it is the ultimate goal is beyond question.

This of course would be true no matter which specific individuals might be on a given firm's board of directors. The logic of the firm would continue to be maximizing profits; those empowered within the corporation who fail to achieve this will undoubtedly be seen as ineffective. Indeed one of the dangers of Warren's proposal is that it leads workers to identify their interests with those of the firm – thereby strengthening the logic of profitability, rather than undermining it.

Finally, the Accountable Capitalism Act attempts to achieve this “back to the future” strategy without challenging global financial integration or imposing controls on the global movement of capital. The question therefore becomes one of why investors would choose

Sanders in Ames, Iowa. Gage Skidmore, 2019.



higher costs and lower returns. With corporate investment free to circulate anywhere on earth and establish corporations in whatever context in most attractive, why would capitalists willingly take on unnecessary costs? Barring controls that could limit the movement of capital, the only alternative would be increased subsidies and tax breaks for investing at home – which would only further increase pressure for public sector austerity and cutbacks to what's left of the social safety net.

And in any case, the state cannot engage in such strategies continuously. As others follow suit, generating a race to the bottom, pressure from capital for an “improved investment climate” will return. This has been the fate of even the most robust of European social democratic states. As new technologies are adapted for the relatively low-skill and low-cost workforces of the global periphery, there is less and less reason for capital to produce even high value-added exports in high-tax and high-wage contexts.

The Struggle for Economic Democracy

Warren's bill is based on what is known as the “stakeholder capitalism” model. Articulated as the antithesis to the “shareholder value” mantra, whereby the fundamental goal of corporate strategy is to increase share prices, stakeholder capitalism envisions corporations serving a broader set of interests, including communities, workers, and consumers. Whereas the idea of shareholder value posits a fundamental opposition between the interests of shareholders and others, stakeholder capitalism would supposedly allow a diversity of interests to jointly benefit from, and help shape, corporate success.

This suggests that the corporation can at least potentially be a neutral force, which impartially arbitrates among different interests that are not necessarily in conflict. Yet corporations are not neutral arbiters among different “stakeholders,” but rather crystallizations of capitalist power; institutional embodiments of the role of “capitalist.” Should a firm fail to perform this function, it will suffer from higher costs and reduced returns relative to its competitors – and therefore less capital available for investment and expansion, leading to cutbacks, layoffs, and possibly bankruptcy. Clearly, no directors – no matter who elected them – would favor a strategy that would end this way.

The stakeholder capitalism model also wrongly implies that

capitalists simply plan the economy, and hence that putting capitalist investment in the hands of workers would allow economic production to come under the democratic control of workers – which would make it kinder and more humane. But where shall the employee-appointed director come down on the question of whether to replace “overpaid” workers in the United States or Canada with those in a low-wage zone, or to “flexibilize” labour markets by using precarious subcontract labour? Would they invest in practices that resulted in lower returns and higher prices – and thus the risk of being outcompeted by others?

Rather than always appearing as “too much,” the most obvious sign of exploitation, and the most direct source of class-consciousness, profits must be defended, even increased if possible. While presenting itself as the antithesis to “shareholder value” doctrines, in fact “stakeholder capitalism” reproduces the identical logic: all concerns must be subordinated to the need to produce value for shareholders. Indeed, the Accountable Capitalism Act could potentially tie workers’ interests to the success of the firm to an even greater degree than before, with all the negative effects on class solidarity that would come with this.

The key question we need to ask is what political gains could result from the reforms advanced by Warren. Would they boost progressive political forces, or bring us closer to a system of production organized to serve concrete social needs rather than private profit and the endless accumulation of abstract value? Sharryn Kashmir’s work on the much-lauded Mondragon cooperative in Spain is revealing in this regard. In her essay in the 2018 *Socialist Register*, she concluded:

“Promoting worker-owned enterprises because capitalist ideology and social relations can accommodate them... capitulates to the hegemony of the market. Lessons from Mondragon are not about the triumph of workplace democracy in worker-owned coops, but they are nonetheless indispensable for socialists. They advise skepticism regarding calls to socialism that set aside politics in favor of quiet, easily sold, or already-existing, everyday forms. This is not to argue that socialist seeds cannot be sewn within capitalism, but it does mean that such planting requires struggle if it is to yield much

in the way of radical transformation, either in specific workplaces or in society more broadly.”

As Kasmir has documented, Mondragon workers have failed to formulate a strategy for socialist transformation, or even to participate in wider struggles for social justice. This suggests that co-ops may fulfill their original goal of limiting, rather than promoting, the worker activism that could build momentum toward a qualitative social change. And of course, Warren’s proposals do not even go nearly as far as direct worker *ownership* of firms.

Like cooperatives, the democratization of corporate governance can indeed play a part in a wider socialist strategy. But unless this

Democratizing the economy begins with subordinating capital to a logic of the “public good” beyond efficiency, competitiveness, and endless private accumulation.

is coordinated by a strategy to transform the state, and supported by a socialist party embedded within a class-based workers’ movement, the effect of such reforms could be negligible – if not worse. Even as “social-

ism” has become more politically relevant in the United States than it has been for generations, its meaning has never been so thoroughly contested.

Today’s left must carefully balance the practical focus on concrete gains for the working class that has played such an important part in its ascent with a broader and more long-term strategy aimed at transcending capitalism. We need to fight for “non-reformist reforms”: that is, reforms intended not merely to fix capitalism, but to build toward socialism, developing the confidence, organizations, and democratic capacities of the working class through struggle. This must go much further than just regulating markets so as to reduce volatility and protect the power of the largest financial institutions. So too must it go further than the Berniecrat call to “break up the banks.” Rather, socialists should look to build the capacity to nationalize finance, and democratize investment by converting the banking system into a public utility. Though we can – and must – work to help the “democratic socialist” insurgency within the Democratic Party, we must also maintain our own, independent socialist

organizations capable of building workers' power at the base and coordinating political strategy.

Democratizing the economy begins with subordinating capital to a logic of the "public good" beyond efficiency, competitiveness, and endless private accumulation. This starts with the expansion of social programs, including healthcare, childcare, education, and public transit along with a massive program of green infrastructure investment. Removing barriers to unionization is also essential. But neither social welfare programs, nor unionization alone are enough. Devising a socialist program for economic democracy requires that we confront the hard questions about what democratic planning might mean.

The state of today is a capitalist state, with no capacities for economic planning or democratic management of social life. How can we create such capacities and institutions? This must be thought through at the workplace and at the community level in terms of schools, healthcare systems, transportation, the production of space, law enforcement, and the like, just as at the national and even international levels. What would it mean to democratize the Federal Reserve, or the Treasury Department, transforming them or replacing them with bodies organized to coordinate a democratic economy?

This of course could include a struggle to democratize corporate governance, but it should by no means be limited to this. And it will not be achieved by Elizabeth Warren passing a bill in Congress alone. We must build working class power – within workplaces as well as outside of and across them, within the state as well as outside of it – if we are to advance the fight for a truly democratic society. •

This article was first published on September 23, 2018, at jacobinmag.com/2018/09/elizabeth-warren-accountable-capitalism-stakeholder.

WHY IS THERE NOW SOCIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES?

Ingar Solty

Today, most people are aware that ‘socialism’ is particularly popular among American millennials. The phenomenon began when the global financial crisis hit. No matter what the design of the empirical research questions that were being asked was, a majority of millennials said they favored “socialism” over “capitalism,” while the older generations, increasing with age, tended to be more pro-capitalist.

Today, many people understand why this is the case. The millennials, often falsely deemed as post-ideological or a-political, have been the worst-hit by the global financial crisis that started in 2007. A study by the Federal Reserve bank found that low-wage sector jobs accounted for a mere 21 per cent of all jobs lost during the crisis but 59 per cent for all jobs that were created during the so-called “recovery.”

This is the labour market that awaited students coming out of community colleges and universities. According to official numbers by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2013, 753,000 workers in the US fast food industry – where the median annual income is under \$18,000 – graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Fresh Elements

These “fresh elements of enlightenment and progress,” as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels called them, that tumbled into the unqualified working class through de-classing, might also help explain the tremendous successes, against all odds, of the mass strikes in the US fast food industry, given that they lack every single kind of structural power of the working class: associational, workplace-bargaining as well as marketplace bargaining power.

Furthermore, because precarious and involuntary temp work is epidemic, despite Obamacare, 16 per cent of millennials still do not

have health insurance, while one in five adults aged 18 to 36 cannot afford routine healthcare expenses and an additional 26 per cent can afford routine healthcare costs, “but with difficulty.”

Given that, unlike in continental European countries, higher education in the United States is not free but costs tuition, students entered this labour market after having gone heavily into debt for their education. Paradoxically, the lack of labour market perspectives runs parallel to an ever-growing burden of student debt, because public universities helped compensate for decreased funding by states constitutionally bound to “balanced budgets” with increased tuition fees.

A study by the Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company, which obviously has an interest in this kind of data, found that, in 2018, 44 million Americans had student loans averaging \$33,000, while the average debt of millennials aged 25 to 34 amounted to \$42,000 in total. The same study predicted that one in five millennials is expected to die without ever having repaid their student loans.

As a result, millennials are simultaneously more educated than all previous generations and nonetheless poorer than previous generations. According to a recently published *Wall Street Journal* report, millennial households had an average net worth in 2016 that



Sanders campaign co-chair
Nina Turner at a rally in Los
Angeles. Sara Mossman, 2019

was almost 40 per cent less than compared to 2001 (Generation X) and about 20 per cent less in comparison to households in 1989. In comparison to previous generations, home ownership among millennials has dropped significantly, from a steady 50 per cent between 1989 and 2001 to merely one third in 2016. As a result, a record 22 per cent of all those aged 25-34 still live with their parents today in the United States.

It is understandable that, given the state of contemporary capitalism, the younger generation of US wage-dependent workers sympathized with and was mobilized by the 2016 presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders.

It is now again on board with his 2020 presidential bid, because Sanders, the self-declared “democratic socialist,” plans to, among other things, undo four decades of bottom-up income redistribution by making college education tuition-free, implementing universal healthcare (“Medicare for All”), a federal \$15 minimum wage on top of implementing a Green New Deal, protecting workers who are unionizing from getting fired, and establishing an American version of workers co-determination within private for-profit companies like Wal-Mart etc.

It is especially clear why his proposals regarding higher education and healthcare are so popular and are perceived as a kind of moral-economy common sense among the young. In short, a generation of workers screwed by the excesses of neoliberal capitalism and climate change is currently turning toward socialism as a result.

Study after study has shown that the millennial generation today is the most left-leaning generation since the end of World War II, not only with regards to social issues like women’s reproductive rights, gay marriage and gun ownership but also and especially with regards to more purely material and economic issues.

The US may politically have seen a sharp turn to the right with the election of Donald Trump – Republican control of the presidency, most state governorships, the Senate and for a time also the House, plus long-term conservative control of the Supreme Court etc. – but a significant societal shift to the left has taken place especially among the young generation, which also happens to be the largest group among US age cohorts and might impact future American politics in a left perspective.

Socialism and Democracy

Now, as the saying goes, the person who is not a socialist at the age of 20 has no heart but the person who is still a socialist at the age of 40 has no brain, could it therefore be that this is a generational phenomenon that might even be short-term once Trump's cutting of the corporate tax rate from 39.6 per cent to 20 per cent will, as Trump argued in a speech in Indiana, cause jobs to "start pouring into our country, as companies start competing for American labour and as wages start going up at levels that you haven't seen in many years"?

Few realize that the conditions described above characterize not merely a generation of workers but the US working class in general, because, without enough demand and without profitable investment opportunities for surplus capital, tax cuts for the wealthy lead to many things such as financial market speculations and Wall Street bubbles, mergers and acquisitions (i.e. job cuts) or uninvested cash reserves like Apple's \$245-billion, but not to job growth, let alone higher living standards for the working class.

This theory has been tried during more than forty years of neo-liberalism and has led to nothing but the starkest wealth and income inequality since the Great Depression, as a study by the University of California at Berkeley economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman has shown. As a result, not only among millennials but also among the wider population in general, dissatisfaction with capitalism is rising.

And because many more people have realized this and because many ex-Trump voters are now open for a Bernie Sanders alternative, the findings of a new Gallup survey are hardly surprising. According to this survey, the popularity of socialism in the United States is "spiking" and a record 43 per cent of all Americans now believe that "some form of socialism would be a good thing for the country as a whole."

As Bernie Sanders put it himself when he addressed a festival-sized crowd in Asheville, North Carolina recently, "In the last four years, since I last campaigned here in North Carolina, on major issue after major issue, ideas, which four years ago seemed radical and extreme, are now the ideas that the overwhelming majority of the American people support."

Interestingly enough, a significant share of the respondents said



Rally against the Bush administration's bailout of Wall Street banks. Alane Golden, 2008.

that they believe that socialism represents the future development for societies worldwide even though the Gallup poll question polemically juxtaposed socialism with democracy instead of with capitalism, as if socialism was anti-democratic instead of the realization and material reinforcement of democracy. Thus, a record 29 per cent responded “socialist” and an additional six per cent “communist” when asked the question “During the next 50 years, do you think most of the nations of the world will have a democratic government, a communist government or a socialist government?”

The first conclusion from this is that socialism in the United States has the potential to grow into a real mass movement. And it is important that we stop for a minute to acknowledge how truly exceptional and historic this is.

Most Anti-Communist Country

This development is happening in the historically most anti-communist country in the world: the country that is most prone to the so called ‘free market’ among the core-capitalist countries.

The country that after World War II seized the role of reinstalling discredited capitalist elites and enforcing capitalist private property in the ‘Grand Area’ of the West, oftentimes with brutal military force against democratically elected socialist governments like the Allende government in Chile in 1973. And the country that safeguarded, with financial, political and military force, the globalization of capitalist

social relations across the world after 1989.

A country that is indeed exceptional in the sense that it is the only one among the core-capitalist countries where, despite capitalist development and the emergence of a wage-dependent working class, the historical socialist labour movement never managed to establish a class-based, programmatic mass membership party, but where to this day the old pre-civil war two-party system of classic liberal parties of dignitaries and nobles prevails.

A country where, linguistically speaking, the term socialist is not even part of the political spectrum because 'liberal' and 'conservative' define 'left' (Democratic party) and 'right' (Republican party) in the US with 'moderates' (swing voters) placed in between. A country where, during the Cold War and the two Red Scares after WW1 and WW2, communists were considered the enemy-within deemed loyal to evil foreign interests and where today only sometimes a 'progressive' – i.e. a continental European social democrat – is added to the left end of the political spectrum.

A country where, unlike in continental Europe, the historic attribute 'social' does not evoke the historic 'socialist tradition' and the historic 'question sociale', which emerged as a term in early 19th century France and from there was exported to the Germanic languages in the 'Vormärz' prior to the 1848 revolutions, but happens to mean the exact opposite: 'cultural.'

A country where therefore, once again unlike in continental Europe, a 'social conservative' is not a conservative who has turned toward a moderate critique of capitalism and pro-labour reforms from above in order to fend off and co-opt further-reaching revolutionary threats from below, but a conservative who is conservative on 'cultural' issues like school prayers or gun ownership etc.

Why Now?

One hundred and thirteen years ago the German sociologist Werner Sombart, a disciple of Max Weber, wrote his famous book *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, which sought to explain this particular American exceptionalism; his findings have been echoed by US scholars ranging from Eric Foner to Seymour Martin Lipset and his army of disciples. Sombart's conclusion was that the shortage of labour and the resulting high wage-levels in combination with the ethnic and racial divisions among the working class made socialism

in the US powerless. In between the commonwealth of roast beef and apple pie, he argued, there was no room for socialism.

Today, we can rephrase his question to “Why Is There Now Socialism in the United States?” And the answer is, the relative lack of roast beef and apple pie, i.e. the state of the working class and the real-lived experience of the erosion of the wage-dependent middle classes have created the conditions for a socialist revival, including the tremendous dynamism of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) over the course of the past four years.

Of course, given the relative weakness of the US labour movement, socialism is still a long haul. And it remains an open question what kind of socialism is meant by respondents to surveys as well as left-wing politicians like Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Could a kind of ‘Socialism 2.0’ emerge and prevail without posing the question of private property in the means of production instead of just aiming at dismantling too-big-to-fail corporations, especially when the “natural monopolies” consist of the likes of Facebook, Google, and Amazon. Nevertheless, this socialist revival and resurgence alone is a development of historic proportions and either way will end up in American history books of the future.

Finally, because the United States is an informal empire, an “empire without colonies,” as the Canadian political scientists Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin have called it, this development is also changing the world. As the German Marxist philosopher Wolfgang Fritz Haug once argued: To think America is to think the world. Although what happens in Vegas may indeed stay in Vegas, what happens in the United States nationally is witnessed and avidly observed by billions of people around the world who tend to know more about the domestic culture and politics of the United States than about that of their immediately neighboring countries. And as revolutions travel across boundaries, as they did in 2011 from the Arab world to Israel and Southern Europe in order to finally arrive in North America as Occupy Wall Street and Canada’s Maple Spring, this revolution which is closely observed and analyzed for replication by the outside, will also surely spread to the world. In fact, it already has. •

This article was originally published on June 6, 2019, and is online at socialistproject.ca/2019/06/why-is-there-now-socialism-in-the-united-states/.

Anti-tuition protests in Montreal during the Maple Spring. Tina Maillhot-Roberge, 2012.



Part II.

**ORGANIZATIONAL
QUESTIONS**

BY PARTY OR BY FORMATION

Seth Adler



Ilhan Omar in Las Vegas.
Gage Skidmore, 2020.

What would happen if the concept of a political formation were turned into a party building strategy? A map and a metaphorical excursion through two of today's emerging democratic left forces may lead to an answer.

This excursion starts by outlining the descriptive and strategic dynamics of the notion of the political formation, as articulated by one of its most creative expositors, Stanley Aronowitz. After more than half a century of political organizing, teaching, and producing upwards of twenty books, Aronowitz devoted an entire work to the challenge of party building on the left. The concept of the political formation was central to his 2006 book, *Left Turn: Forging a New*

Political Future. Aronowitz applied it to the challenge of party building in ways that resonate with conditions today:

“Before us is the urgent necessity of launching the anti-capitalist project in the United States and, with great specificity, making plain what we may mean by an alternative to the authoritarian present. We are faced with the urgent need to reignite the radical imagination. We simply have no vehicle to undertake this work – a party that can express the standpoint of the exploited and oppressed that, in the current historical conjuncture, must extend far beyond the poor and the workers, since capital and the state have launched a major assault on the middle classes. In short, we need a political formation capable of articulating the content of the ‘not-yet’ – that which is immanent in the present but remains unrealized.”

While the concept of a political formation in its descriptive dimensions, implicates a vast complex of social processes (not unlike the concept of a social formation), it can also be used strategically, as Aronowitz does, in partisan politics and analysis. A key starting point is to conceive of it as describing political forces that cohere within – and between – movements and parties. Accompanying this starting point, is the partisan strategic challenge, that building an effective left party today cannot be accomplished without a mediating organizational form or forms, which by Aronowitz’s account, can be developed using the formation concept.

Right and Left Formations

Seen in this way, it might strike one that only the right has realized what Aronowitz alludes to, which is to say, the Tea Party and Trump’s election campaign cohered between movement and party in ways that enabled this force to build independent, interconnecting political forms, to triumph in the Republican Party, and to win the executive power of the nation. And yet the 2016 election and the current period witnessed the expansion of a state power-seeking politics on the left that also coalesce between movements and parties. These relationships however, are more deleteriously riven.

Notable on this political spectrum is the division between the Bernie Sanders’ aligned activists, organizations, and parties who in-

sist on transforming the Democratic Party leftward (such that it will become stronger than the Republicans and the neoliberal democrats), and those activists, organizations, and parties who insist that all electoral action must be independent of the Democratic Party.

Despite this rather territorial division, many in the Democratic and Independent left groupings believe that majoritarian state power must be won in all 50 states. They also believe this must be done by waging a (social and/or socialist) democratic political revolution.

The Tea Party and the Trump Campaign: The Chicken and Egg Formation

Mapping this fractured left terrain can highlight what a political formation strategy might offer party builders. Examining the Tea Party and the Trump mobilization, as guiding forces of a right-wing (or alternatively, an alt-right or far-right) political formation, may also help.

Starting in the wake of Obama's first election and swelling to over 900 local groups in 2010/2011, the Tea Party formed a populist right-wing like-minded, activist-attracting magnetic field, running around and through the Republican Party.

Even in its heyday, the Tea Party was not a formal party. Nor was it just a movement. As Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson have detailed, Tea party localized groups are decentralized (yet appreciably ideologically synched between power-elite and grass-roots base); its activists were and remain overwhelmingly white and skew older; there are candidates and national groups that use the name and/or associated politics, such as the now defunct, Tea Party Caucus in congress and the currently functioning House Freedom Caucus; media and political personalities such as Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh helped organize Tea Party related rallies, conventions, town hall turnouts, and inspired local chapters; billionaire-capitalist funders directly and indirectly supported and still support – Tea Party identified politicians, think tanks, political action committees, and legislation-influencing organizations, such as FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity.

As to its scope, Rasmussen Reports' polling results indicated that in 2010, 34% of voters said, "they or someone close to them [was] part of the Tea Party movement" (the Pew Research Center put that number at 41%). This suggests the easily accessible, wide-

ly engageable qualities of a movement that also, like a party, finds many of its politics focusing on winning majoritarian control over the state; that goal has been effectively engaged moreover, in the ways that Tea Party activists have triangulated the Republican Party establishment against its voting base (e.g., using inside-outside the Republican Party, wedge creating politics and Tea Party identifying candidate tendering strategies).

The Tea Party paved the way for the Trump campaign and victory. Conversely, the influence of Trump on the Tea Party developed over many years (manifest for

instance, in Trump's championing of the Obama birth-certificate conspiracy, and, before the Tea Party, in bigotry-stoking populist politics, such as his newspaper ad purchasing, death-penalty advocating, campaign against the Central Park Five). In respect to reciprocal influences of these formation-guiding forces, Tea Party politics were more influentially guided during the 2016 elections by Trump and his campaign and organizers (funders, etc.).

These activist, state-power winning politics could be called a united front. That term generally connotes too great a likeness of demands and action among participants (while the concept of the popular front doesn't imply enough ideological-sync or strategic/tactical depth). This suggests that the notion of a political formation, and the way it coheres between movement and party provides a useful strategic and descriptive frame.

Setting up the Map:

A Metaphor and Schematic for Left Party Builders

Mapping the *electoral-engaging terrain* of left state-power seeking politics, can clarify how one, and more imminently, two left formations can be said to be developing. Because of the extent of the – Democratic-Party, independent-party split, this base will be mapped with the help of the metaphor of two magnetic poles (North and South) and its magnetic field (or it could almost as well have been two magnets, where the mutually repelling, like poles are continuously trying to occupy same space, only to continuously repel each other; this, despite that smallest bit of magnetic urge of one or the other to turn around and pull together). The metaphor is also employed to evince something of what these activists' political practices might feel like, located as they are at the crossroads of the pow-

er-elite's efforts to advantage capitalist wealth holders and their allies – in the nation's electoral and state power-accessing institutions.

In this respect, the *party-based poles* are populated by the most electorally-institutionally fortified political activists and politics in the left democratic arena. These would be Green Party activists on one side (who are in the fourth largest electoral party in the country, with ballot access in 21 states; they placed Jill Stein on the ballot in 43 states in 2016); and *Bernie Sanders' in-party active allies*, along with *Sanders* himself, on the other side (whose nationwide candidacies are based in the Democratic Party, which blankets the 519,682 elective offices in the US). Just as the magnetic poles are the strongest forces in a magnetic field, these in-party politics are the strongest, and most mutually institutionally polarized, stage left, as to their “work through our party only/make our party *the* party of the country” politics.

In, around, and between the pole areas are organizations and activists – in the field – that have joined, to one degree or another, in allied action with the Sanders in-party activists or the Green activists. Those more toward the middle, are generally less pulled, and/or pull themselves less, in either direction (and exert more electoral-engaging party-orienting independence from the two pole parties); this is to also suggest that the closer a field polity is to one or the other party-based pole, the more likely they are drawn to it.

Given this schematic of the basic structure and power-cooperation relationships, the strategic details can now be mapped onto this foundation. The schematic moreover, suggests the rough outlines of the form and organizational shape of two (repelling, attracting, and interrelating) left formations, in contrast moreover to the more tightly-singularly constructed party form and the more diffuse form of the movement.

In, Around, and Between the Poles:

Field Mapping Large Electoral-Left Oriented Groups

Starting with the “work through the Democratic Party only” – and Sanders-in-party allies located – party-based pole position, and moving toward the Green/independent party only pole position of the Green Party – some of the organizations and parties in the field that have activist bases of thousands of people in multiple states, are:

- *Moveon.org* and the *Working Families Party*: both organiza-

tions support Democratic Party candidates; and while they support some candidates that align with the Democratic Party's neoliberal power-elite, as with the Working Families endorsement of Cuomo or MoveOn's funding of "blue-dog" congressional representative Melissa Bean, they at times align with the Sanders' pole: both organizations endorsed him;

- *Our Revolution* was inspired by Sanders and initiated by Sanders' leadership and campaign staff; it works inside and outside the Democratic Party pushing it to the left, while supporting left Democratic candidates; some of its hundreds of chapters overlap with progressive and democratic socialist groupings: it is comparatively more focused however, on raising money for, and supporting allied, progressive-left Democratic candidates;

- *Labor for Our Revolution* is part of Our Revolution. It includes the Amalgamated Transit Union, the American Postal Workers Union, Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, the Communications Workers of America, International Longshore and Warehouse Union, National Nurses United, and United Electrical Workers;

- *Nurses United* pushed Our Revolution further toward a middle field position when their president, RoseAnn DeMoro took the stage with Sanders at the People's Summit in 2017 and called on him to leave the Democrats and join the Draft Bernie for a People's Party effort; the AFL-CIO stirred in this direction at their 2017 convention, passing Resolution 48, committing them to study "independent and third-party politics");

- Toward the middle area, but nearer to the Democratic pole, is the *Democratic Socialists of America* (DSA). DSA engages socialist and left social movement and electoral politics; it's candidates almost always engage the Democratic ballot line and prioritize pushing the Party to the left (their radical caucus called on DSA to break from the Democratic Party; this indicates a toward-the-middle-moving position);

- Also toward the middle is *People's Action* (PA). PA describes itself as, "a national organization of more than a million people." It supports progressive candidates (mostly Democrats and occasionally Independents) and programs

that are often aligned with Sanders' politics (formerly National People's Action, it has a community organizational structure that is independent of political parties, and focuses on social, economic, racial, and climate justice);

- In the middle area, shaded toward the Democratic Party, are *electorally-engaged supporters* of the Movement for Black Lives (a united front of one hundred groups, it also builds upon the Black Lives Matter groundswells); the Movement's political platform includes a position supported by the Greens more so than Sanders (i.e., he is against reparations). As to why allied electoral activists constitute a diffused middle-field position, the mayoral victory of Chokwe Antar Lumumba in Jackson Mississippi was waged through the Democratic ballot-line, supported by Sanders and allied organizations, and steeped in some of the Black Freedom and independence traditions shared by the Movement's activists; Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Jobs with Justice activist Attica Scott won a state house position in Kentucky and BLM and Democratic Socialist activist Khalid Kamau won a city council seat in South Fulton, Georgia: both ran as Democrats;

- Moving closer to the Greens is *Socialist Alternative* (SA); also in that general area, but more engaged with the Greens is the *International Socialist Organization* (ISO): both organizations engaged the Sanders election groundswell and called on him to run as a Green after he lost to Clinton; SA runs and wins candidacies independently of the Democrats and the Greens, while sometimes endorsing democrats; ISO has utilized the Green ballot line for their candidate work.

Resistance and/or defeat-Republicans focused organizations: *Indivisible* (which claims thousands of chapters), *Sister District*, the *Women's March*, and ActBlue are not placed in field positions. By focusing on resisting Trump and/or electing Democrats, these organizations resist internal tendencies to oppose neoliberal capitalist-collaborating Democratic candidates, office holders, and strategies (e.g., by drawing on the "pragmatic" and neoliberal-capitalist inclusive identity-politics positions of supporting those Democrats who will ostensibly beat Republicans). This focus opens up opportunities however, for leading activists in those organizations, as well as for Sanders and independent-aligned activists, to move people in

these groups past this so-called pragmatism/inclusivism. When and if these groups programmatically justify, endorse, and organize for leftward candidacies, they would be more strategically identifiable in field positioned relationships.

Smaller, National-Office, Digital, and/or Political Action Committee Oriented Field Politics

As to mapping some of these politics: Starting inside and close to the Sanders-aligned, Democratic Party pole is *Democracy for America* (a liberal-progressive organization initiated by Howard Dean, they endorsed Sanders); next is *Justice Democrats* (arising out of the Sanders groundswell via leaders of the Young Turks Network and Secular Talk; recently, the “youth driven social activism” group #AllOfUs merged with Justice Democrats); and there’s *Brand New Congress* (with a Sanders’ influenced platform, they support candidates, including Republicans, who commit to their platform): these organizations are nationally centered, appreciably digitally-engaged, money-raising and/or candidate campaign-supporting projects. Next is *Swing Left* (they focus on “turning” swing districts): they combine online and grassroots fundraising with progressive-left candidate campaigning/supporting, and on-the-ground group-organizing work. Moving toward the middle, three socialist or communist groups that support left Democrats and/or work to push the Party leftward are the *Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism*, the Communist Party, USA, and *Freedom Road Socialist Organization*.

In the middle area, and closer to Sanders’ pole is the *Vermont Progressive Party* (the original Sanders-supporting party, they run against Democrats, and sometimes coordinate candidate campaigns with them). Around the same area is the *Justice Party*. It is a national party with a ballot line in Mississippi (its 2012 presidential candidate was on the ballot in 15 states). It is small, and comparatively thinner in its activist, organizational, and candidate base (it was founded by former Mayor of Salt Lake City, Rocky Anderson, who ran as its presidential candidate in 2012). Like the Vermont Progressives, the Justice Party endorsed Sanders.

In the middle area is the *Peace and Freedom Party* (PFP): with ballot access in California, its candidates run against both Democrats and Greens; left parties utilize its ballot line (the *Party for*

Socialism and Liberation's candidate for example, won PFP's 2016 presidential nomination). Also in the middle area is the Socialist Equality Party (they run independent candidates) and the *League of Revolutionaries for a New America*: they have been active within the Green pole politics (if not also within the Democratic pole). Occupying a similar location to Peace and Freedom, the *Socialist Party* runs candidates in several states.

Moving closer to the Green pole is the socialist organization, Solidarity; they have utilized the Green ballot line for candidacies.

Last but not least, are three relatively smaller political formation insinuating groupings:

First: the *Draft Bernie for a People's Party* project would be located in the middle of the field. It was designed for Sanders to lead a huge party that is independent of, and/or a breakaway from the Democrats. When challenged in 2017 by the Greens to make their party the basis of the effort, Draft Bernie organizers encouraged the Greens to move toward the Sanders' politics by melding into the project. In November 2017, they moved beyond the "waiting for Sanders" stance, to become the chapter building – *Movement for a People's Party*. As its name implies, it proposes an independent left formation-like, strategy that develops between movement and party.

Second: *Left Elect* is a national, electoral-engaging, political formation-insinuating

project that is fairly inclusive of the larger field and pole politics on the Green side. It periodically brings together hundreds of the field and pole activists aligned with the independent/Greens' orientation against Democratic Party-based electoral politics. It is significantly smaller and less consistently organized than like convergence projects in the Sanders' orbit (such as the People's Summit). However, it is also comparatively more formalized and legitimated in its inter-organizational and group-connecting work (as indicated by its prominent left-independent cross-partisan activist Board makeup).

Third: spanning both sides, the *Richmond (CA) Progressive Alliance* is an example of a local united front-like coalition that also evinces something of a conscious left political formation building position. This coalition extolls its left-progressive multi-party and organizational makeup, and includes Green and Democratic party identifying office holders, (dues paying) members, and activist participants.

Comparative Party-Building Capacities

How can this list and metaphor-schematized, power/cooperation relationships model be read as mapping not one, but two political formations? And what does this have to do with party building?

Examining how the pole politics relate to each other and to the organizations in the field (e.g., in power relationships), may offer some answers. This in turn will suggest that there is more at play than any one party could currently bring together/unify (e.g., in terms of oppositions, autonomies, differences, and alliances between field and pole politics); this is so, even as such a unity-making accomplishment would seem efficacious, and widely understood as such, vis-à-vis realizing all the “parties” similar hopes for winning majoritarian power.

This leads to a political formation-implicating question: what renders the pole as compared to the field politics, the most electorally resistant – and powerful as such – to doing what they generally hope to do, namely, uniting the pole and field politics in just one, rather than two party-engaging forms?

One answer is that the pole as compared to the field politics are more institutionally advantaged and fortified in staying their mutually polarized, party-located, party-building course. Such fortifying advantages and factors include:

- Substantially greater numbers of *state ballot lines and state presidential ballot listings*;
- electoral *state-power accessing rights, laws, and privileges* (including candidate funding grants; adherent poll workers, vote-accounting officials, and other administrators of electoral democracy; and state power access-engaging coverage in governmental ballot materials, which reach into many national households);
- democratic *mass-participation legitimating factors* (e.g., more people are currently willing to publicly connect with and put sustained volunteer time into something that’s called a political revolution, if it is ensconced in democratic-electoral campaigns compared to if it is only outside of electoral politics);
- corporate *mass media political coverage predilections* (which Sanders, e.g., eventually made some headway with).

Opponents, Despite Political Agreements

As consequential as those comparative, polar-fortifying strengths might be (to building two polar parties rather than one), the pole politics, are comparatively more capaciously subject to state-by-state legal and partisan, Democratic-Republican party hegemony-seeking dynamics. These factors counter both pole politics' ability to build the preeminent electorally-engaged left-leaning party. This situation speaks of how pole, as compared to field politics' positions, more intensely repulse each other. This is indicative moreover, of a winner-take-all, representative-republican system, where government and party power-elites have long imposed "soft-authoritarian" state power-acquiring restrictions on third parties and marginalization of left electoral activism within the major parties. This is a system where ironically, if party-building leftists do not cohere into one party, *the more races they run in together*, the more times they feel compelled to defeat each other's candidates; this, despite holding some similar political positions (and despite the polarization-ameliorating cross-endorsement, ranked-choice-voting, and proportional representation-voting options in the few states and municipalities that empower them).

These comparatively more intensified pole oppositions are evinced through perennial battle-wearying inter-pole broadsides – about selling out to the lesser-of-two-evils (as per Sanders' endorsement of Clinton), or harming the Democrat's ability to prevent authoritarian candidates (e.g., Republicans) from taking power (a.k.a. the Nader/spoiler effect).

From Poles to Formations

A quick perusal of the field and pole politics shows that the Sanders' pole and allied field activists and organizations outnumber the Green and Independent left activists. Nevertheless, the power/influence balance between the two pole politics change cyclically. Compared to the 2016 election-cycle, Sanders'-aligned post-election forces are smaller. Despite hard-fought battles moreover, the neo-liberal Democratic elite defeated the pro-Sanders forces and won majority power in post-election, national political bodies.

This situation raises a strategic question: Without bringing together more of the field and pole politics, how will they, like the Greens, avoid falling perennially short of winning majorities in 50 states?

This suggests two related questions: How has the revolution that Sanders popularized in mass democratic activism, been met with the rise, of two formations, and how might they cohere into one?

Brass Tacks

In respect to these questions, what does it mean that Sanders and allies are working in a party that blankets 519,682 elected offices (tallied in 2012)?

What does it mean for both political bodies, that those who vote leftward, and whom the left wants to represent and register – including people ascribed as oppressed and working-class – extensively vote Democratic?

Over 500 thousand offices poses quite a challenge moreover, considering that at any one time, only one left party held more than a few dozen positions: that was in 1912 (when the Socialist Party held an estimated 1,200 seats).

Ebbs in Sanders-aligned and Independent Left Formations

These matters suggest additional challenges to building a sustained 50-state power winning force: Sanders' post-2016 in-party allies and organizing work, focuses on defeating the Party's neoliberal elite; this is not a priority that many field organizations' participants can engage (although Sanders' "Medicare for All" Bill/campaign might generate comparatively greater between-elections field/pole involvement). This priority brings their numbers downward, toward the size of the Green pole activists (in part, because Greens are more expansion-oriented year-round due for example to engaging ballot-status drives).

Apropos of building an effective 50-state power-seeking mobilization via a combined Green Party and Independent field polity-based force: if the Tea Party can serve as a strategic exemplar of an effective guiding influence of a political formation, then the outside-inside strategy vis-à-vis the Republicans that is their hallmark, might help explain why a Democratic left, comparatively speaking, has developed more capaciously in state power-seeking and mass formation building. Going for the power elite's jugular moreover, by battling the Democratic or Republican elite inside their body politic, rather than politicking just outside/independent of it, has become an effective, mass support-winning strategy (it is in these

gilded bunkers as well, where popular left and alt-right candidates consequently appear – and, via corporate media, have been rendered to appear – more threatening to a widely detested establishment; more politically leveraged; and more legitimate to many people: both Trump and Sanders manifest such “threats” and legitimacies).

Logics of (de)Polarization

While such challenges to creating one preeminent left party are sometimes addressed by left party-building activists, arguments that also garner attention focus on why only one of the polar party-building options is correct.

One persuasive line of reasoning of Independents, as to this latter position, is that when it comes to the Democratic Party, their power-elite’s capitalist-collaborating, hegemony-drawing power has never been defeated (since the Party’s founding). To the extent that argument is persuasive, it can lead to the left alternative of engaging/building a party that will never have such elites in the first place.

These arguments aren’t as persuasive when considered in a different light, vis-à-vis answering the 50-state, party-building questions. Independents do not adequately address the scope issues (e.g., number of races to access and offices to win); the locational issues (e.g., going for the jugular inside the national Democratic body politic, while waging local and state battles where the Party is more porous and decentralized, and/or what parties the vast majority of people vote in/for); or the mercurial yet pressing “time left” issues (e.g., how much longer until it’s too late to attain egalitarian-establishing social democracy, let alone, ecological-sustainability and peace). Overall, they do not *roundly engage* their anti-Democratic-Party left-position – with the revolutionary electoral challenge issues, that is – including how to move from fragmented organizations and formations, to build and/or merge into one formation, if not also one party.

Listing To and Fro with Somewhere to Go

Given these factors, plus the larger scope of the Sanders-aligned election-cycle forces, it would behoove Independents to move toward the Democratic left, rather than demand that these polities only come to their independent politics.

Similarly, it would behoove Democratic leftists to redress prac-

tices of filtering-out appreciable portions of the Independent left (as witnessed, e.g., in debates on reparations, identity politics, and in the People's Summit opposition to grant main-stage time let alone a workshop to presidential candidate, Jill Stein).

And if Sanders (and/or Democratic left-progressive office holders) assented to the Draft Bernie call, say after a bad 2020 election, might that ignite a massive Party break-away, and grassroots democratic-revolutionary groundswell (future puzzle: compel 80 million to vote, if not to register for this party)?

Applying a Left Formation Strategy to Party Building

The Movement for a People's Party is small at present. This suggests that, if this movement were to build the pre-eminent party of the left, its organizers would have to engage massive recruiting and outside-inside organizing, with and beyond all the field and pole organizations of the Independent left.

This challenge suggests something similar for the illuminating party-building proposal of Seth Ackerman. His proposal, entitled, "A Blueprint for a New Party," calls for a working-class oriented and electoral-engaging organizational form (there's some ambiguity as to what it means to call it a party; this may be intentional). This suggests that not unlike the Movement for a People's Party, Ackerman's proposed organization integrates movement and party (with the labor movement, and a mass democratic base of members, for example, playing key roles; and it also does this, because of its candidate supporting strategy, which proposes an independent-of-the-Democrats position on supporting independent and Democratic candidates).

The proposal however, barely deals with existing parties, organizations, and movements; of those, it engages just one in detail, i.e., the defunct Labor Party. This raises the concern of what activists who take up the Blueprint's proposal, would actually do – about, with, apart from, etc., – the thousands of large and small active organizations and parties (that for example, endorsed and formed bases of activism for Sanders or Stein). This is also to say that to the degree the Blueprint proposes a new organizational entity or party, how will its activists deal with the competitive (electoral-institutional, if not partisan/sectarian) relationships between their – projected, pre-eminent working-class/left-inflecting party-to-be – and all those other

organizations, parties, and politics, who are actively working to become a similar uniting force (no too few of whom moreover, have long been working through alliance-making processes in order to advance such developments)?

Overall, what are the proposal's chances for success when it seems preponderantly developed in the absence of exploring how these many currently active left politics, organizations, parties, movements, and activists *can better work together*?

Building Left Unity via Party and/or Formation?

What are the possibilities of further building the political formation dynamics of the Democratic and Independent lefts, even if separately at first?

Like Left Elect, Our Revolution carries a cross-organization legitimacy amongst a spectrum of field and pole politics (albeit, less formally produced). This is because of its ongoing and founding connection to Sanders; the way its leading activists carry out similar politics in outside, inside strategies (e.g., fighting-the-Party-elite); its expanding grassroots chapters, that overlap with other like-minded organizations; its candidate-supporting practices, which monetarily support field organization's candidate work and candidates; and, it "wears the name" associated with Sanders.

While the in-party political grouping of the Progressive Caucus can be strategically explored as constituting one nodal point of an incipient, more consciously uniting, Democratic left formation, Our Revolution can be seen as constituting another. The latter project is more independent, organizationally deep, and large scale, as to the way for instance, it engages an outside-inside strategy, from an incipiently independent outside. As one example, the initiator of the People's Summit, Nurses United, which is part of Our Revolution, could be considered as extending such a formation-building capacity outward via the People's Summit; this convergence space enabled 4,000 people to better connect, coordinate, network, and consolidate their Sanders-allying politics and candidacies; while smaller in scale, Left Elect's utilization of convergence spaces such as Left Forum can be similarly parsed.

As to the Movement for a People's Party, because it is independent of the Democrats (and spurns an outside-inside strategy), and yet would need massive numbers of Democratic leftists to be

successful (as called for in the Draft Bernie proposal), it will likely continue to disenchant many in the Democratic left. This strategy moreover, rejects what helped make the Tea Party successful (and what the incipient Democratic left is doing), namely taking the fight to the elites' power-center.

From Two Formations to One

One strategic unity-building route for the Democratic and Independent lefts might be to play to their compatibilities, while working to reconcile areas of (lesser and greater/polar) opposition. This suggests that: For any formation-building, organization-making step to gel between formations, they would do well to produce a trustable body and strategies that attend to single formation-cohering matters (e.g., creating proposal-floating processes – regarding what they might jointly do).

Cross-Partisan Revolutionary Democratic Practice

In addition to developing conscious formation-building dialogues among field and pole politics, cross-partisan projects would seem efficacious for developing the formation more cohesively. Updating Cloward and Piven's voter-empowering projects combined with like projects that The Reverend Dr. William J. Barber, II is developing today, might present a non-internally-divisive focus (well-suited for non-election cycle "down" periods). This speaks of a rebellion-tinged (and morally fortified) politics to overturn state and party elite authoritarian-inflecting voter-purging systems (targeting people of color and the poor), their legal-partisan strangulation of voting and third parties, and big-money-led hijacking of democracy.

This project offers political-electoral wedge strategies to draw state democracy-administering authority, and alt-Right and extreme center elites out of their democracy-tampering holes. Targets of this strategy would be capacious including, office holders, candidates, court houses (as places of protest and remediation), party elites, prominent alt-right bigotry fomenting/dissembling pundits, registrars' offices, state houses, city halls, and motor vehicle voter registration programs (and many other state programs). It's relatively less divisive because it doesn't require left parties and electoral-engaging organizations to abandon their candidate supporting practices.

Other formation-building strategies might be developed based

on how they enhanced cross-partisan, formation-cohering politics. Strategies might include shared funding/fundraising projects (e.g., including transparent/accountable, in-kind or monetary support from the cooperative business sector and unions); developing mutual aid and participatory-democratic projects like Occupy produced; creating education and food programs via local chapters of formation-participating groups. Compared to voter-expanding campaigns, such projects might be less electoral-wedge-politics focused.

Trust-Building in Leadership-Soaked Politics

The neoliberal power-elite have long marginalized the left-egalitarian presence, bona fides, and confidence throughout public culture. It's not coincidental that leftists find few like-minded individuals who can easily/quickly generate mass political draw and trust.

This hints at why it would take prominent leading-figures and activists to draw the widest number of progressives, social movement activists, and leftists to a national cross-partisan focused, formation-cohering organization-developing strategy. Whether Sanders or someone representing him would participate is hard to say; suffice to say that net and pole politics would do well to proffer representatives.

On the question of calling together selectors (to pick the members) of such a trust-building body – possibly four (or more) initiators, two from each side of the field – might come from the formation-engaging groups of Our Revolution (two) on the one side, and Movement for a People's Party and Left Elect (one each) on the other.

Formation and Party

Another challenge is how cross-partisan formation-cohering projects could be part of building a party (more powerful than the Republicans). Whether it was a new party or a transformed Democratic Party (and because cross-partisan work could be conducive to both strategies in the early stages), that issue would likely be evaluated at various benchmark points, e.g., after the 2020 elections.

Strategy-engaging questions can be addressed first to the Independent left:

A. How can the Independent left (or, who among them might) participate in outside-inside strategies to turn the

Democratic Party leftward via a single political formation/organization building process?

B. How might this be done while engaging a Draft Bernie/win-over-Democratic-progressives party-building proposal, with (say agreed upon) benchmark-achieving objectives set to certain times?

C. What would happen to the priority of winning their parties' independent candidacies (including the US presidential candidacy) and platform positions, and how might they change these, if they also prioritized turning the Democratic Party leftward?

Some thoughts on these matters: Because the Democratic left is larger, it would likely have more influence in decision-making in any singularly cohering organizational form of the formation; such influence would be concretized moreover, if proportional voting was set up. Their greater influence would consequently, likely be asserted vis-à-vis supporting inside-outside Democratic Party strategies.

Conversely, because influential Democratic left forces, such as within DSA and Our Revolution allied unions, are pushing to build an independent party (and can be seen as pushing the politics of Sanders, left Democrats, and Independents to the left), the Independent left would be strengthened in this basic position and would find more allies and opportunities across a broader range of polities.

Joint Action

By working together, Independent and Democratic left polities could coordinate their respective candidacies (which is already being done in a few instances). Coordination might first apply to (eventually many non-presidential) races where the Democratic left had no candidates, but the Independents did, and vice versa (the left/electoral map above, can be expanded, and consulted to find or develop such multi-party candidate models; what might have happened with the Greens' ability to build southern alliances moreover, if they, like some Sanders-aligned organizations, went much further in supporting the Democratic ticket-engaging polities active in Lumumba's successful race in Jackson).

If polarization vis-à-vis engaging an outside-inside Democratic Party strategy gave way to common strategy-making – scenarios like the following could conceivably be possible: imagine Green and in-

dependent activists allying with the Sanders forces to win battles in the Party's power centers and localities (on wedge demands such as banning all capitalist-corporate/large-capitalist-personal donations, committing the party and candidates it supports to single-payer, zero tuition, a \$15 minimum wage, and winning key committee majorities). Would they not, together, likely win more victories than the Sanders' forces have realized (Sanders is an independent: why not imagine what it might take to have independents such as, Jill Stein, Cynthia McKinney, Kshama Sawant, Lawrence Lessig, Brian Jones, and Ralph Nader stoking these fires)?

If cross-partisan strategies are eventually reduced in scope, in favor of developing one platform and one independent party (or taking over the Democrats), the formation-cohering process might become more strenuous. The experience however of collaborating in sizable cross-partisan formation-cohering campaigns and candidacies, plus whatever the political tensions of the time would inspire in greater solidarity, could place participating polities in a better position to succeed, than if no such organizational guiding force in a formation were developed. Eventually, they might get to a mutually trusting place where they could vote on which single presidential candidate to back/run.

The prospect of a left formation rising, and helping build a unified party, might be met with the retort: because the Independent and Democratic lefts have incorrigible (north-south-pole-like) differences, it'll never happen. Does that mean it should not be pursued, even as it is already happening? •

Seth Adler most recently coordinated the Left Forum for almost a decade. He was one of the founders of the national Jobs with Peace campaign; as a sociologist, he has taught community studies, political economics, and sociology in universities in California and New York City. This article was originally published on June 27, 2018, and is online at socialistproject.ca/2018/06/by-party-or-by-formation/.

THE AMERICAN LEFT RESURGENT

Prospects and Tensions

Rafael Khachaturian and Sean Guillory

The American political system is experiencing a crisis of hegemony. The moderate, bipartisan center that had been the mythical linchpin of American politics during the “long Cold War” is facing the possibility of a terminal decline. Donald Trump’s election has put this crisis into stark relief, having turned the Republican Party’s decades long flirtations with white ethnonationalism into an overt endorsement.

At the same time, the organized left is also resurgent. This revival was first exemplified in Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, and turned more durable with Bernie Sanders’ insurgent campaign during the 2016 primaries. Sanders’ social democratic message galvanized the Democratic Party’s progressive base, and spurred the rapid growth and the electoral victories of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The DSA and other left organizations outside the Democratic Party have achieved the unimaginable by returning “socialism” to the mainstream.

The American left currently finds itself on unfamiliar political terrain. Interest in socialism is growing, especially among a younger generation. Outrage toward Trump’s racism and xenophobia, millennials’ anxieties about their economic prospects, and a deepening skepticism about the ability of establishment to address these problems has caused many to seek answers on the left. The American left hasn’t experienced such a rapid influx of activists and adherents since the 1960s.

Uncertainty and Potential

And yet, this rebirth comes with uncertainty. One of the challenges facing the left since the anti-globalization movement of the late 1990s is producing lasting institutions, and making tangible inroads

within working class communities, especially among people of color. Though a diffuse swathe of organizations and groups are cultivating substantial political capital, these forces have yet to cohere into a unified movement or forge durable coalitions. Potential working class constituencies for a left agenda and their institutions – trade unions, churches, and social organizations – remain wedded to the Republican and Democratic parties. Questions about the sources of political power, how to take it, and the very ideological and institutional nature of democratic socialism dog many activists. Moreover, the task of recomposition into a new political force has inflicted the American left with its own internal polarization. It remains a patchwork of different groups split between trying to push the Democratic Party to the left or to carve out an independent space outside the American political duopoly. Though revived, the left has a long uphill battle before it can claim solid support among working class Americans.



Rally against the Bush administration's bailout of Wall Street banks. Alane Golden, 2008.

The current situation is best understood as a period of *ideological* and *organizational* renewal and consolidation. At the same time, within these disparate articulations of the left's content and form, it is possible to identify certain emerging tendencies and contradictions in its trajectory. Four issues in particular – the meaning and content of “democratic socialism,” the left's relationship to the Democratic Party, bridging the divide between class and identity along which the left has fragmented since the 1980s, and the tension of organizing via both social movements and elections – are likely to shape its organizing successes in the near future.

The US Left at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

The brief surge of the American left in 2011 with Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was a reawakening of political forces sublimated by the War on Terror. The 9/11 terrorist attacks punctured an active and vibrant anti-globalization (or alterna-globalization) movement. After a short period of disorientation, these left forces quickly recalibrated into an antiwar movement in the run up to the Iraq War. Though the Iraq and Afghan wars quickly descended into quagmire, opposition to the American imperial thrust failed to unite the many strands of left tendencies into a coherent opposition.

The 2008 financial crisis offered opportunities for the articulation a new left politics, especially in magnifying the growing class disparities that have defined post-1970s capitalism in the United States. The spontaneous explosion of OWS in September 2011 injected enthusiasm into a mostly dormant protest politics as Occupy camps mushroomed in cities across the United States. Like the antiwar and anti-globalization movements before it, Occupy was an eclectic mix of progressives, socialists, anarchists, and even libertarians. This archipelago of protest activity, centered around the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York City, though successful in putting forward the slogan “We are the 99%”, failed to resolve all of its ideological and organizational contradictions.

OWS' emphasis on horizontalism prevented its concretization into lasting institutions once its protest energies were exhausted. In their demand for autonomy and mutuality beyond state institutions, the Occupiers aspired to a society “based on organic, decentralized circuits of exchange and deliberation – on voluntary associations, on local debate, on loose networks of affinity groups.” As Jodi Dean

has argued, the “individualism of [OWS]’ democratic, anarchist, and horizontalist ideological currents undermined the collective power the movement was building.”

The ephemeral nature of OWS and its organizational form based on the physical occupation of public space made it highly susceptible to police repression. By late fall 2011, Occupy camps were dismantled in a nationally coordinated effort between local police and the Department of Homeland Security. Activists were placed under surveillance and subject to arbitrary arrest. In all, by June 2014, the website OccupyArrests had chronicled 7,775 arrests in 122 American cities.

The American left’s inability to consolidate after the 2008 crisis was due to its uneasy relationship with the Obama administration. Though it quickly revealed itself as Clinton-lite on economics and foreign policy, legislation like the Affordable Care Act, social-cultural victories like same-sex marriage, and the right’s vitriol toward both Obama and his agenda were enough to temper the emergence of a left opposition after the defeat of OWS.

While an active left pushing a more equitable social-economic agenda went dormant after 2012, the racism at the heart of the American carceral state surged to the surface. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement illuminated not only police extrajudicial killings and the prison industrial complex, but the embedded racism in the American criminal justice system as a whole. The issue of police violence and incarceration, long ignored and even justified by the American media, became a focal point of public discussion. BLM transformed political activism in African-American communities, brought in a new generation of activists, especially black LGBTQ and feminist leaders, and signified the end of the Civil Rights generation’s long dominance over black politics. Uttering “black lives matter” publicly even became a brief litmus test for many mainstream Democratic candidates, a gesture that reinforced the precarity of black bodies versus the privilege of white bodies. Though BLM’s lasting political successes were few and highly localized, its *rhetorical* intervention returned racism, police violence, and radical prison reform to a central place in any viable agenda for the new American left.

Despite their limitations, Occupy Wall Street and BLM made crucial contributions. First, OWS’ channeling of outrage toward the

1% moved income inequality and class into the American political mainstream. Black Lives Matter underscored the centrality of race to the American class structure by zeroing in on the “whiteness” of that 1% and the institutions of state violence that maintain it. Ultimately, BLM reiterated an age-old left truism: any serious analysis of capitalism must see the liberation of people of color as a condition for the equality of all. Both of these contributions laid the ideological and rhetorical foundations for a social democratic message that took aim at the Democratic Party’s neoliberal turn.

Second, the burning out of OWS and the fading of BLM from the national agenda signaled the shortcomings of horizontalism and activism that had been hegemonic in the American left since the 1990s. Activists who cut their teeth in OWS learned from its limits and began reevaluating the necessity of institutional engagement, organization building, and the party form as a locus for political activity. Those inside and outside BLM realized that coalition building and the forming of united fronts on the local and national levels with other movements were necessary for substantive radical political change. Both of these became major features of the American left’s flowering in the watershed year of 2016.

The New American Socialism

The return of the “socialism” to American political discourse surprises many. Most liberals and conservatives assumed that socialism as a viable political project disappeared with the collapse of Soviet communism. Yet since the 2008 economic crash, attraction to alternatives to really existing capitalism among the post-Cold War generation has increased. Among self-identified Democrats, positive views of socialism now outpace those of capitalism, 57% to 47%, even as Americans’ views about the two have stayed relatively consistent since 2010. Bernie Sanders’ Presidential campaign, the rapid growth of the DSA, and the election of new figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have revived curiosity in what “democratic socialism” exactly is, and how it differs from “socialism” and even “communism.”

The growing popularity of democratic socialism has placed new pressure on its advocates to provide a clear definition. Part of the confusion comes from Sanders’ own popularization of “democratic socialism.” In a speech in November 2016, Sanders equated “social-

ism” with Roosevelt’s New Deal, robust labour and environmental regulations, and the welfare state. While no socialist would oppose such measures, many would see Sanders’ notion as rather milquetoast. Judging from debates about “democratic socialism” in the left press, the ideology contains much of what socialists from previous generations have advocated: an end of exploitation and oppression through the radical democratic restructuring of political, economic, and social relations along equitable and cooperative lines.

Notions of what a socialist economy would look like range from a form of mixed economy to one based on cooperatives and workers’ control. Most democratic socialists are skeptical of centralized planning. Many call for a market socialist approach where the nationalization of healthcare, telecommunications, and the financial sector coexists with small, privately-owned businesses and worker-owned cooperatives. Like socialists of the past, today’s adherents broadly see the end of all oppressive Isms (sexism, racism, imperialism) as only possible through the radical transformation of the relations of production under capitalism.

If “identity politics” dominated much of the American left since the 1970s, today’s left seeks to reinsert class back into the pantheon of struggle. But rather than being economically determinist, socialist ideology today is an eclectic mix of a variety of Marxist, post-structuralist, and progressive tendencies. While class analysis may provide the primary lens for a socialist analysis, sexual, gendered, racial and other identities and positionalities are seen as adding layers that shape the particularities of a group’s class relationship and struggle.

Within democratic socialism, the modifier “democratic” plays two functions. First, it is an ideological commitment to democracy as a central aspect of any socialist policy, institution, or practice. The insistence on democratic is at once a distancing from and a recognition that the lack of democracy caused the failures and tragedies of communist states in the twentieth century. Rhetorically, it is also a preemptive rebuttal of the dismissals of socialism as a necessarily totalitarian ideology. Following from this, the democratic aspect is a disavowal of the democratic centralism of the Leninist party model, and of insurrection and violence as the primary means for revolutionary change.

Today’s democratic socialists range from gradualists to advocates of immediate sweeping reforms. But all show a willingness

to work politically within the confines of liberal democracy, at least temporarily and provisionally, to achieve power. Unlike the communist revolutions of the last century, democratic socialists seek to build a constituency for socialism via a combination of mass movements and the ballot. In this, the strategic orientation of today's democratic socialists is closer to the Eurocommunist movements of the 1970s than to the Bolsheviks of the early 1900s.

Despite consensus on the broad strokes of democratic socialism, the DSA is a "big tent," multi-tendency organization. It includes a myriad of left-wing trends, many of which entered the organization during its membership boom in 2016. This has resulted in a fragmented identity within and between local chapters. Moreover, the influx of new members often unfamiliar with the nuances of socialist ideology, terminology, history, and practices add to the challenges of forging a shared organizational identity. This "identity crisis" is most vivid in discussions over the left as a community, its values (ideological, moral, and cultural), and how to regulate them.

The left as a community of shared values, ethics, friendship, comradeship, and mutual aid has a long history. Socialist and communist parties were more than just political movements. They were also social and cultural spaces that gathered like-minded people. Crucial to party life was the provision of entertainment, spaces of sociability, and the cultivation of personal relations in addition to politics. However, the history of these organizations also shows that the line between politics and values is porous. Not only do internal alliances intersect with personal relations, but conflicts over values tend to take on political valences. As historians of socialist and communist parties have shown, most party expulsions resulted not from ideological differences, but from personal behaviors deemed in violation of "party ethics."

The DSA recognizes the importance of community building as an important aspect to political work. "Community building helps sustain us," reads one chapter organizing document. Members are urged to recruit friends, hold house parties, and, especially for newcomers, speak to their personal socialist conversion experience. The document suggests: "Let people talk about why they are there and tell their personal story," "how did you become political?" "what does democratic socialism mean to you?" All of this "builds bonds between people." The importance of a socialist community contains a

crucial political thrust: to “counter neoliberal capitalism which divides and isolates us.”

Yet the left has a poor track record in reconciling its political mission (build a mass base among the working class) with its emphasis on community (providing a social space for its adherents). One of the main hindrances is the left’s historical tendency to slip into puritanism and overly regulate and adjudicate norms. Often, and the DSA has endured many national and local scandals (exacerbated by social media), building a “socialist” community is constituted through the identification, shaming, or expulsion of its transgressors. Given the politically charged atmosphere of the left, these ethical questions are often articulated, judged, and punished in a political and ideological key.

The contradictions between politics and community have not gone unnoticed. The ethical contours of the “socialist community” has been the subject of debates about the social purpose of organizations like the DSA. In a biting critique, Benjamin Studebaker warned against the left as serving as a site of “spiritual self-actualization.” Others have cautioned against members’ tendency to “fixate on the purity and homogeneity of their own in-group and attack other members of DSA for not meeting their standards.” Still others point at a penchant toward “rigid radicalism” by reducing “good” politics to an individual’s values, morals, and ethics.

The question of the socialist community raises other challenges. Building working class power requires facilitating the activism of that class. Yet activism often requires a measure of social and economic privilege. The demands of work, family, and other responsibilities and risks can preclude the involvement of working class members, especially those of color. In these cases, activism tends to fall on the shoulders of a small coterie of members. Often it is privileged minorities that exercise disproportionate power in shaping a community, and substitute informal relations for procedure. Like socialist and communist organizations before them, today’s left runs the risk of cliques and factionalism not necessarily based in ideology (though often expressed in those terms), but forged through informal networks and friendships. Common attempts to remedy the power of informal networks with calls for horizontalism (a flattening of internal hierarchies) or transparency can merely mask the persistence of these relations.

Organizing Beyond Class and Identity

A major effect of the post-2016 period was to relitigate the long-standing debate on the left about class and the politics of identity. On the surface, Sanders' narrative of the corruption of the "billionaire class" and Clinton's cynical deployment of the language of intersectionality seemed to neatly capture this division between an Old Left focus on "working class issues" (jobs, social protection) and a post-New Left shoehorning of the language of identity into what Nancy Fraser has called the "progressive neoliberalism" of the Clinton and Obama years.

Trump's victory, as well as Sanders' earlier success in states like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Indiana, prompted many liberal observers to advance a narrative of populism and white working class revenge. Centrists like David Brooks, Mark Lilla, and Francis Fukuyama have blamed the left's focus on identity politics over the material concerns of average Americans. These readings understand the 2016 election through the lens of anti-elite resentment: silent Americans' embrace of Sanders and Trump are equivalent expressions of populist anti-establishmentarianism.

Still, to read the resurgence of the left strictly as the "materialist" pushback against liberal identity politics cedes far too much ground to the liberal narrative of a clash between class and identity – between material and "post-material" concerns, or between the winners and losers of globalization. Today, the American left is being forged anew through mutually-informing organizing and critique. It is undergoing a complex process of organic reconstitution, in which traces of both the Old and New Lefts exist. Old debates – on nationalism and internationalism, race and political economy, social reproduction and the limits of neoliberal feminism – are being reworked and reframed, now more closely influenced by the immediate pressures of contesting for power than before.

There is a shared understanding that the left must move beyond the neoliberal identity politics of the 1990s and 2000s. More controversial is the political subject that should be the main focus of organizing efforts. One fault line has been a distinction between a strategy backing a handful of national campaigns (Medicare for All, a Green New Deal) in coalition with organized labour's "rank and file," and one seeking to broaden the sites of struggle to include precarious and undocumented workers, racial minorities (especially



in poor urban areas), tenants, students, the LGBT community, and sex workers, among others. The two outlooks agree on the need for building a mass movement and the democratization of existing political and social institutions. Their disagreement is about the locus of the most transformative and radical energy. Namely, who will be the new political subject, what form will it take, and how to balance between a national program and local initiatives?

One point of controversy is whether the socialist left should throw the bulk of its energy and resources into universal, popular demands, such as Medicare for All. Building on Adolph Reed's critique of liberal identity politics, proponents argue for the creation of a "cohesive block" forged from "shared economic demands based on one's location in the capitalist class structure." At the core of this approach is an insistence upon the ultimate class character of identity politics, and against the essentialization of the identity-subject position of an oppressed group.

In contrast, those who stress the unique structure of racial domination and the racialized and gendered nature of all class struggles argue that adhering to a normative concept of class "excludes social relations anchored in rightlessness, wagelessness, and extra-economic coercion, [that obscure] the violence constituting capitalism's capacity to reproduce itself." Per these accounts, the left cannot neglect

the radical origins of identity politics and the multifaceted struggles, demands, and contestatory narratives that they enable.

These discussions over identity and class have functioned as a proxy for strategic debates, within the DSA and beyond, about the most effective means for a socialist movement to achieve institutional power. If the major problem with liberal identity politics has been its tendency to essentialize subjects and project a specific political affect onto them, today's left faces the challenge of articulating existing grievances into a new political formation. Rather than the conversion of people to socialism, the left must see politics as the process of forging unity out of plurality. It can do so by advancing concrete measures that speak to popular discontent and draw specific subject positions into a broader coalition of forces.

Should the left hope to overcome the stale debate between the primacy of class or identity, this will involve bridging grassroots mobilizational campaigns, including for racial and criminal justice, climate justice, and a "feminism for the 99%," with local, city, and state-level electoral efforts that can cement the gains of these localized struggles within public institutions, potentially opening the way for further radical demands.

Between Elections and Movements

The new American socialism is highly aware that the pressing short-term issues that will determine the future of this movement will be fought out on the terrain of the liberal-capitalist state. Today's socialists are beginning to ask what it would take to govern, and if so, how a political movement can meaningfully engage with the state. These conversations have become more concrete and nuanced, and largely inspired by Marxists like Luxemburg, Gramsci, Miliband, and Poulantzas that sought to move beyond the dichotomy of "reform or revolution." This revival of state-strategic thinking has attempted to outline a viable path that draws on the best of both electoral and mass movement politics, while acknowledging the productive tension between them.

Given that the United States' "first past the post" electoral system incentivizes a two-party arrangement that has historically marginalized socialist and labour parties, the Democratic Party casts a shadow over most of these left strategic and tactical conversations. Historically, the DSA's political strategy had been pragmatically

pushing the Democratic Party to the left, toward what its founder, Michael Harrington, had called “the left-wing of the possible.” Yet today’s DSA is a different organization. The rapid influx of younger members dropped the median age from 68 to 33 in the last five years. Though a national organization, its decentralized structure provides substantial autonomy for local chapters (although not always autonomy within a given chapter) to set their own priorities. Each chapter is, in theory, capable of adopting initiatives that are sensitive to the local correlation of political forces, institutional capacities, and resources for political campaigns.

Two broad political trajectories have formed within the DSA. One prioritizes electoral activism within the Democratic Party around universal social measures such as housing, healthcare, and criminal justice reform. The other focuses on “base-building” and mutual aid by organizing workers, tenants, and students, and stressing autonomist initiatives with the aim of immediately breaking from the Democrats.

A dominant intellectual tendency within *Jacobin*, with which the DSA is closely linked, advocates “non-reformist reforms” or “revolutionary reforms.” Vivek Chibber has argued for a gradualist approach: a “combination of electoral and mobilizational politics” seeking to eventually build a labour-based party that can both pursue policy reforms and generate power in civil society. With the emergence of such a labour-based party unlikely in the short term, the focus has been on actualizing Sanders’ “political revolution” by supporting popular universal measures such as Medicare for All and the more radical gains that this would inspire.

Responses to this dualist strategy have pointed to the structural limitations set by both state and capital, and the inherent contradictions in a strategy that bridges electoral participation and cultivating social movements. To that extent, critics argue that substantive, base-building socialist reforms cannot be won through the Democratic Party. Attempts to either reform the Democratic Party or compete on its terrain, they posit, is counterproductive. Instead, political energies are best directed at immediately cultivating independent organizations and building a mass socialist party.

Yet appeals to “base building” within the working class are likely to remain a political slogan without an accurate concept of that class. Apart from the superficial discussions of the “white working

Sanders at a rally in Seattle.
Tiffany Von Arnim, 2015.



class” in relation to Trump, the relative absence of the language of the “working class” in American political discourse compared to the overwhelming appeals to the “middle class” is indicative of this problem. Recent campaigns such as the Fight for \$15, the 2018 West Virginia teachers’ strike, numerous graduate student unionization efforts, and the Marriott workers’ strike hint at the reformation and emergence of a more racially diverse and increasingly precarious “new working class,” especially drawn from education, service work, and care work. Still, these pockets of organizing have not yet coalesced into a larger movement representing all skilled and unskilled, full-time and itinerant, native and immigrant, and industrial and service workers. Forging a new politics that brings a multifaceted conception of class to the center of working people’s identities and constitutes them as a new political subject will be the crucial test of the left’s success.

The institutional barriers of the American electoral system also present challenges that largely incentivize socialist candidates to run as Democrats. A “first past the post” arrangement discourages the left from splitting the vote. A decentralized voting system encourages state-level voter-suppression schemes, including frequent voter roll purges and strict identification requirements. These, in addition

to the anachronistic electoral college, mean that the American system structurally over-represents sparsely populated, conservative, rural areas at the expense of left-leaning urban centers.

Thus far, DSA's legal status as a political organization rather than as a party has allowed it to instrumentally use the Democratic ballot line to either endorse or run left candidates without the accompanying financial and legal constraints. Seth Ackerman has advocated a popular proposal in favor of a "national political organization that would have chapters at the state and local levels, a binding program, a leadership accountable to its members, and electoral candidates nominated at all levels throughout the country." Yet this proposal has not been officially adopted, and the majority of DSA-endorsed candidates simply run on Democratic Party ballots in a patchwork manner.

The results have been mixed. In the 2018 electoral cycle, DSA-endorsed candidates were elected to state-level offices in Virginia, New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Maine, among other states. In addition, Ocasio-Cortez, the face of the new electoral socialism for many, was recently elected to the House of Representatives as the youngest ever woman in Congress. However, a number of other progressive candidates backed by Sanders' Our Revolution organization lost in red-blue swing states. In the autumn 2018 mid-term elections, it was a broader liberal antipathy to Trump, especially in more moderate suburban areas, rather than a thirst for a more social democratic agenda, that motivated the Democratic "Blue Wave."

The example of Ocasio-Cortez notwithstanding, socialist organizations like the DSA do not currently have the capacity to define or influence either federal-level or gubernatorial elections. Even its ability to influence or win local elections is highly subject to local conditions. Concerns about the cooptation of the DSA by the Democratic Party are thus more indicative of the growing pains over the collective identity of an organization that saw an unexpected, rapid influx of new members. The DSA's growth over the last two years has largely been via disaffected liberals and progressives. With DSA-backed candidates continuing to run as Democrats, successfully pushing the Democratic Party to the left may encourage the exit of newer members who joined as part of the organization's post-2016 membership surge. Yet at this moment, the tactical disagreement between working with(in) the Democratic Party and independent base building is a

false binary. Both cases overstate the left's capacities to simply choose one or the other path, rather than its course being largely determined by circumstances not of its own choosing.

The DSA's self-described character as a "big tent" organization also raises questions about its future direction, especially regarding Sanders' likely declaration of his 2020 presidential candidacy. His campaign's success will indicate just how much the left has made socialist messaging more mainstream for both Democrats and the general electorate. While the DSA is likely to endorse Sanders, sympathetic critics have pointed out the risks of doing so. Mainstream Democrats will likely be hostile to Sanders' messaging even as they appropriate parts of his agenda. Sanders' supporters will also be expected to back another Democrat should he lose the nomination, potentially reducing the DSA to another electoral auxiliary for the Democratic Party. Finally, there is uncertainty as to what exactly the DSA can independently contribute to Sanders' campaign beyond that of Our Revolution.

Given these nuances, the choice between elections and social movements is more tactical than strategic. Put differently, it requires a shift from ideological struggles to political ones, and realizing them into institutional power. Radicalizing disaffected liberals by appealing to "socialist" values is in tension with the support for policies that speak to the interests of disaffected but largely non-politicized people. Short-term alliances with Democrats and progressive liberals, especially in congressional and local elections, may be necessary both as defensive and offensive measures. Defensive, to stave off right-wing assaults on democratic institutions (civil and political rights, including voting rights and birthright citizenship). Offensive, to challenge Republican hegemony in local and state legislatures across much of the country. Such a "Popular Front" would not mean a blanket support of Democratic Party candidates and policies, nor official endorsements (which should be extremely selective). Instead, such a progressive-left coalition would be contingent on the left's ability to set the agenda on popular reforms such as health care, labour and reproductive rights, and immigration.

Looking Forward

One hundred years ago, the Bolshevik Party was able to channel the demands of the masses – peace, land, and bread – into a revolu-

tionary political program. Today, the challenge facing American socialists is more daunting. Unlike the revolutionary wave that swept Europe in the aftermath of WWI, capitalism – in its regional, national, and global forms – remains hegemonic. However, the current crisis of capitalism and liberal democracy has produced cracks in the edifice. If we are currently living through an interregnum between a dysfunctional old order and an uncertain new one, the task of the American left is to articulate a convincing alternative vision to the current widespread societal discontent, economic inequality, and racial domination. Not only must this vision be transmittable to a broad spectrum of the population, it must also posit convincing, short-term, realizable reforms without tempering its long term goals for a total social transformation.

So far, the growing popularity of socialism has been bolstered by a handful of energetic electoral victories and a widespread sense that politics as usual is incapable of addressing the magnitude of the social problems facing the USA. At the same time, these challenges require a reevaluation of the left itself. Notions of a left simply comprised of a “movement of movements” or an amorphous multitude have revealed their limits. Growing a mass social movement requires turning outward the many ideological struggles within the left, transforming them into political struggles, and building tangible institutional power to achieve victory.

Despite positive signs, as of now, the left is yet to have a significant impact on the political balance of forces. As socialist ideas become more mainstream and popular amidst a broader, generational shift in the organization of class hegemony, they will also draw more scrutiny from both the right and the liberal center. At the same time, the left is confronted with its own internal growing pains, conflicts, and challenges. The left, therefore, remains a target of two old foes: repression and delegitimation from without, and self-destruction and cannibalism from within. How the American left navigates these waters in the run up to 2020 and beyond will reveal just how much mettle the current resurgence possesses. The real test of the left’s power and influence, in other words, is still to come. •

This article was originally published in the fall 2018 issue of Sociology of Power and is online at socofpower.ranepa.ru/files/docs/4_2018/5.pdf.



Cornel West, who supported the Sanders campaign as well as the Movement for a People's Party. Gage Skidmore, 2018.

SEARCH FOR A MASS POLITICS

The DSA Beyond Bernie

Sarah Mason and Robert Cavooris

Last November, in one of the most hostile rental markets in the world, in a city where a majority of residents are renters, a local rent control ordinance was defeated on the ballot by a margin of 38 per cent. In the year running up to Election Day, organizers, including our own local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), were faced with a question of how to build the power of tenants in order to win things like rent control.

In the beginning, we pursued a two-pronged approach. We held meetings with tenants from specific developments and talked concretely about the issues they encountered there. Additionally, we engaged in door-to-door canvassing (of renters and homeowners alike) to gather the signatures needed to get rent control on the ballot. However, once the measure, Santa Cruz Measure M, was on the ballot, the temporal demands of the election subsumed all other organizing efforts. Canvassing for votes was king. Looking back, we think this experience may tell us a lot about why we were ultimately unable to pass rent control and build tenant power more broadly.

At the national level, the DSA is now facing a similar issue in our approach to another electoral project: the presidential candidacy of avowed democratic socialist Bernie Sanders.

DSA and Resurgent Left

Since 2016, membership in the DSA has exploded, from 5,500 to over 55,000 dues-paying members, grabbing mainstream attention and leading some to start referring to it as the “resurgent left.” Much of DSA’s growth can be attributed to the popularity of Senator Bernie Sanders’ first presidential campaign, which began in the spring of 2015. Within months of announcing his run, “socialism” was Merriam-Webster’s most looked-up word of the year and Sanders-approved policies like Medicare for All entered the mainstream

political discussion with great favor. As a new presidential election cycle begins, Sanders remains the most popular politician in the country and, for those aged 35 and under, socialism polls more favorably than capitalism.

But our organization, the DSA, was divided over whether to endorse his second run. A debate at our regional conference in Los Angeles yielded an even number of voices on both sides of the question. Since then, a poll of the general membership produced a 76 per cent to 24 per cent result in favor of endorsement, with significant abstention, and in March, the organization's highest body followed that recommendation to officially endorse the candidate. While the outcome is clear, it's still surprising that one in four members voted against a Sanders endorsement. Is it possible the poll was asking the wrong question?

In the debate, one vocal tendency has argued that popular socialist politicians, and Bernie in particular, are *the only viable vehicle* through which working-class power can be organized and a socialist program achieved. Those who disagree with the absolute terms of this argument are compelled to take an opposing position. The most obvious alternative to "Yes, endorse!" thus becomes "No." But the issue is much more complicated, and its reduction to this "for or against" frame is symptomatic of a larger unresolved issue that has been haunting the organization: How do we ground our organizing in a materialist conception of class power? That is, what is the best way to become a part of the struggles that other working people – those who must become the subject of any mass socialist project – are involved in every day?

Hollow Exercise or Challenging the Rule of Capital?

Now that the DSA's endorsement of Sanders is decided, it's all the more important to tease out the niceties that have been lost in the debate so far. At stake is what kind of politics will dominate the emergent socialist movement in the US for years to come. Will we end up being an electoral machine and data farm, with socialism a parliamentary project to be carried out in a distant future, many election cycles away? Or can we weave together our workplaces, apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, and neighborhoods into a power that subsists here and now, responsive to the ever-changing struggles of the moment?



DSA members at the Occupy demonstrations. David Shankbone, 2011.

Making a conscious choice about our future means asking more questions. What is the strategic goal of supporting Sanders *beyond* and *in relation* to specific policy gains or electoral victories? What will the DSA do to ensure that a Bernie 2020 endorsement not only brings people closer to the organization, but involves them in a kind of politics beyond voting? In what ways does our electoral activity around Sanders increase the power and self-organization of working-class people and their ability to engage in struggle? What forms of political participation are best suited to develop and equip our class with the power it needs to directly challenge the rule of capital? How do the temporal demands of a two-year electoral cycle fit into a broader strategy for overthrowing capitalism? Unless we can answer these, endorsement is a hollow exercise.

In Pursuit of Mass Politics

Some have raised criticisms of Sanders' record, citing concerns over his support of SESTA/FOSTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act/Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, legislation that critics say will make sex work more dangerous), his repetition of misinformation

about Venezuela, his ambiguous “record of voicing both support for and criticism of the state of Israel,” and his recent vote to fund a border-security package that includes money for fencing and more border patrol agents. These are important criticisms that we don’t want to dismiss. But for argument’s sake, let’s accept that even if we significantly disagree with Sanders on these issues, there might be compelling reasons to become involved in the campaign of a self-styled democratic socialist: to connect with his supporters, to push the political discourse to the left, to stay relevant, and so on.

In her statement encouraging an endorsement of Sanders, DSA activist and *Jacobin* assistant editor Ella Mahony writes, “By participating in the Bernie movement, we can multiply our forces, meet and build relationships with people who can run as socialist candidates at every level, plug into Labor For Bernie, work to overcome the separation between labor and socialists, and transform DSA into something rooted in neighborhoods and workplaces of all kinds.” On its face, there’s nothing to disagree with here, but what’s less clear is the step between participating in an electoral campaign and becoming “rooted.”

It’s often argued, for instance, that Sanders provides a platform for the kinds of policies that would constitute the minimum of any respectable socialist program, carrying a message of “class-struggle politics” to all who will listen. From this, the argument implies, workers come to understand their real conditions and can begin to fight back accordingly. We thus hear of the desire to “advance a class-struggle perspective,” to “communicate a message,” and to offer a “positive vision for a radically fairer society.” These aspirations are fair enough, but the emphasis on spreading ideas appears to suggest, at times, that the reason why socialism does not yet exist is that people simply haven’t heard of it. Ultimately, the strategic relationship between the spread of socialist messaging and the accrual of working-class power is fuzzy, at best.

Receptivity to socialist ideas did not begin with Bernie. In the United States, the financial crisis and Great Recession that began in 2008 and the neoliberal orientation of the Obama Democratic Party surely set the stage. Out of these conditions, the first stirrings of a “class-struggle perspective” in the United States came, most notably, from the Occupy Wall Street movement, which became a national phenomenon. The “positive vision for a radically fairer so-

ciety” did not spontaneously arise out of stump speeches, but out of historic movements like Black Lives Matter; Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) against Israel; and the Arab Spring – that is, out of the refusal, rebellion, and self-organization of working people themselves around the world. It is one thing to know which way the wind blows, but it is quite another to conclude, as one author recently has, that Sanders is the “storm that *generates* that wind.”

Without recognizing the material basis for the re-emergence of a robust US socialist movement and the power of the working class – something that goes beyond the membership numbers of the DSA – we risk falling into a kind of idealist trap. We might think, for instance, that the growth of the possibilities for socialism is just a gradual accumulation, a linear and continuous accretion of partisans to our cause and resources at our disposal. But, as the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin once pointed out, politics is more like algebra than arithmetic: Changing variables may even invert the value of an entire equation, turning what was positive in one instance into a negative in another. Even popular electoral victories in socialism’s favor have transformed, suddenly, into its largest defeats, as in Chile after the 1970 election of socialist Salvador Allende.

The twentieth century offers many examples of election-focused parties that were able to increase their membership and voter support without translating that into a revolutionary strategy. Historian of European socialism and democracy Geoff Eley notes:

“There are all sorts of ways of using the electoral process as a vehicle, as an instrument, as a platform, as an arena in which you argue the importance of your particular kind of politics – as opposed to the electoral machinery that the Social Democratic and Communist Parties simply became. During the course of the later twentieth century, the whole *raison d’être* of the party became reduced downwards into fighting an election, winning an election, keeping itself in office, or getting back there.”

There are potential opportunities in engaging in electoral politics, but there is also the pitfall of using elections and organizational growth as a means of deferring essential strategic questions. To avoid this from the outset, the notion of accumulating support for working-class or socialist politics needs to be put on a materi-



al footing: What are the concrete goals of winning people over to democratic socialism? What kind of organization are we building, and how do we get supporters to be a part of that? What other movements or spaces provide opportunities for working-class organization, and how do we relate to them? What do we need to do to create continuities across the inevitable ups and downs of explosive mobilization? In short, we need a strategy that goes beyond changing minds, spreading a message, or getting votes, however important these may be as part of a larger project.

Our argument on this point is simple: Electoral organizing, as a primary mode of doing politics, is incapable of building the type of power required to fundamentally shift the balance of forces away from the well-organized and well-funded global capitalist class. To be clear, this does not mean that we should not vote, run candidates, or push for legislative reform. But it does mean that we should have a clear understanding of just how far these activities can take us. Moreover, more work is needed to think through how one form of activity – electoral organizing around Bernie Sanders – translates into the kind of mass, militant organizations that we envision.

Political Forms

Lacking an understanding of the limitations of electoral politics and the struggle of ideas, we are likely to just assume that changed minds are permanently changed, and that once we create a spark at the level of ideas, or within the spectacular arena of electoral politics, more radical consequences are sure to follow.

David Thompson, a member of Philly Socialists, recently offered up a compelling analysis of the various tendencies in the DSA. While his portrayal flattens these tendencies a bit, he offers an important cautionary note about the assumptions that take over when we lack a materially grounded strategy, which is to say, a strategy that is rooted in the activity of the class:

“It’s almost as if both sides in the debate believe the power is already there in the class, it just needs to be activated, turned on, by the right socialist ideas. The DSA ‘right’ will talk about the ‘millions who voted for Bernie Sanders’ or [about] unionized teachers as if they’re sleeping giants – which, potentially yes, but if the liberals keep out-organizing us and winning deeper bases in the class? No. The ‘left’ is less prone to these kinds of ‘the class is on the march’ type statements, but they are also less ready to explain how their approach leads to more working-class power.”

We can’t assume, in other words, that the socialist masses are waiting in the wings, ready to enter onto the stage of history after watching a few Bernie speeches or reading some articles online. These activities may spark an interest, but Thompson is right that our movement and the power of the working class in general will only grow if we can also create opportunities for people to become active and organize themselves. It is one thing for someone to acknowledge, for instance, that the rent is too damn high, but another for them to link up with their neighbors, form a tenants union, confront their landlord over shitty conditions, organize for rent control, or launch a rent strike.

Thompson is also correct that we’re not operating in a vacuum. Strategy means considering the moves of others, thinking about eventualities that are outside our control. One consideration is the jockeying of and within a Democratic Party that is undeniably in flux. If our tasks are different in this election compared to 2016, the

conditions will be too. We'll face competition from those seeking to incorporate their own lessons from the last time around to hold the party's reins, or, alternatively, to opportunistically use the discourse of socialist politics to advance their own position.

Compared to the last election, Sanders will be one in a larger and more varied field of candidates. It may therefore be difficult for voters to distinguish Bernie's view of democratic socialism from Elizabeth Warren's support for Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, and worker participation on corporate boards. If the most obvious referent of both candidates' policies is the liberal New Deal, will it be decisive that Bernie talks about socialism and Warren about "accountable capitalism"? There are important differences between these candidates, and Warren is most likely tacking left on these issues in part because of Bernie's success at publicizing them in 2016, but the real distinctions might not be obvious to the casual voter – certainly not as obvious as those between Clinton and Sanders in 2016.

Another consideration: What if Bernie loses? A Bernie loss could just as easily lead to an expansion of the Democratic Party's Big Tent rather than add a new layer of adherents to the ranks of autonomous democratic socialism. Many media narratives already reduce Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to representatives of the left wing of the Democratic Party. If democratic socialism is to mean more than that, we need to work against this tendency.

Ultimately, to define democratic socialism means not just proposing policies and demands, or offering up new slogans. Political content is only half the game. Radical change requires us to think about political forms, different modes of doing politics.

Voting and media consumption are, no doubt, major modes of political engagement for many Americans, which is one of the arguments for participating, strategically, in the presidential election process. On the other hand, even at peak US voter participation, nearly one-third of those eligible choose to abstain. This is not to mention the millions of workers in the United States who are not eligible to vote – disproportionately black and brown – either for having been incarcerated or for not having the right passport. And recently Republicans have cut many more from the voting rolls. Unless it's possible to vote socialism into existence – we think it's not – then our task is to transform the meaning of political participa-

tion and activate the excluded and apathetic. Voting and reading, and even canvassing and calling, must give way to organizing in our workplaces and neighborhoods, making demands on our bosses, shutting down freeways, and refusing to be limited by the horizons defined for us by politicians.

Competing Forms of Housing Politics

In California, a sober assessment of recent work on housing issues further demonstrates the need to move beyond an electoral conception of mass politics. Prior to the election this past November, DSA chapters throughout California participated in canvassing for Proposition 10, a ballot initiative that would expand rent control protections for tenants living in some of the most expensive and inhospitable rental markets in the world. Much of this work was coalitional, with groups like Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, or ACCE, a large, multi-issue nonprofit, taking the lead. In practice, it amounted to hundreds of enthusiastic DSA members using voter rolls to target likely voters (who are also more likely to be homeowners), by going door to door, engaging people as atomized individuals, and convincing them to Vote Yes on 10. While this work allowed many tenants to share their frustrations with DSA members eager to lend an ear, it is less clear what kind of lasting capacity was built out of this form of organizing.

With millions and millions of dollars pouring in from around the country to defeat it, Proposition 10 failed. Debates about how to recover our momentum around housing justice have resulted in two distinct conceptions of politics. On the one hand, some have proposed a rewriting of the same initiative, tweaking various parts of it to satisfy the concerns of those swing voters who said they might have supported it, but didn't like this or that language in the bill. The focus on crafting the "right" legislation, however, misses the point: Our defeat signaled that working-class people – tenants – did not have the capacity to defeat money. So we're faced with the choice: either offer a watered-down version of the initiative (which presumably would have a better chance of passing with "statistically likely voters"), or build the tenant power needed to make it pass.

As we described in the introduction, in the city of Santa Cruz our DSA chapter faced a similar set of issues around Measure M, a local rent control measure. When we began campaigning, we hoped

the election would jump-start some simmering efforts at organizing a tenants union. The measure would provide, we reasoned, a strong basis for talking to tenants about their housing conditions. We imagined that neighborhood committees tasked with regular canvassing could be the mechanism through which broader tenant organizing could occur.

Unfortunately, the pressures of the election made this “let’s do both” approach increasingly difficult. Some, even when recognizing the need for tenant organizing, thought that the specifically electoral aspects of the work needed to come before anything else – writing the measure, collecting voter data, leaving flyers on as many doors as possible, publishing information about the details of the ordinance, and disputing the details that were constantly mischaracterized by a well-funded opposition. On the other hand, how could the campaign make lasting gains if we did not build a strong tenants movement in the process? Even if we had passed rent control, we would have to be ready to defend it when, inevitably, it came under attack in the courts or in future elections. Since we lost the election, we were left with a fractured coalition of activists who had come together specifically around the campaign and no obvious way forward. While we brought attention to the issue of tenants’ rights and living conditions, we didn’t build power for working people, for the local socialist movement, or even, for the most part, for our chapter.

What we did have were hundreds of anonymous email addresses, which have now been compiled into a list that gets blasted whenever the city council discusses anything related to housing. Contrary to expectations, access to this data has not resulted in the kind of upheaval necessary to thwart the aspirations of what is now a very well-organized landlord class. This fact is important; many have argued that we should build our own email lists and data while canvassing to ensure that we walk away from these campaigns with something usable. But building an email list is no substitute for building the kind of militancy, trust, and collectivity needed to beat back the bosses, the landlords, the white supremacists, and the cops.

Crafting popular legislation that can persuade given constituencies, spending money to publicize simple messages, and using largely unidirectional forms of mass communication is one mode of politics – the predominant approach to elections among capitalist parties today. The alternative, however, is to create our own consti-

uency. This is not a question of demographics; it means organizing venues of collective agency that don't require us to play by the rules of game.

One model of tenant organizing that occurred alongside the Proposition 10 campaign was put forward by a group of East Bay DSAers organizing under the banner of, which stands for Tenants and Neighborhood Councils. TANC's conception of how to build tenant power differs from the more electorally oriented members of the organization in that they conceive of tenants' power as the ability of tenants to withhold their rent. It might take a lot of work to get to that point, but like workers' ability to collectively withhold their labor, renters, when united, can use this collective threat to win immediate gains from their landlord. The type of organizing that is required to build this capacity is one that can easily lend itself to electoral action, if appropriate, whereas the inverse doesn't appear to be the case.

In Oakland, TANC successfully organized 41 buildings operated by the same landlord and pressured her to change subtenant policy, which required new tenants to earn three times "market rate" rent, even though the rooms being rented were rent controlled. In Los Angeles, the LA Tenants Union also has used the rent strike as a weapon against landlords with some measure of success.

Asking the Right Questions

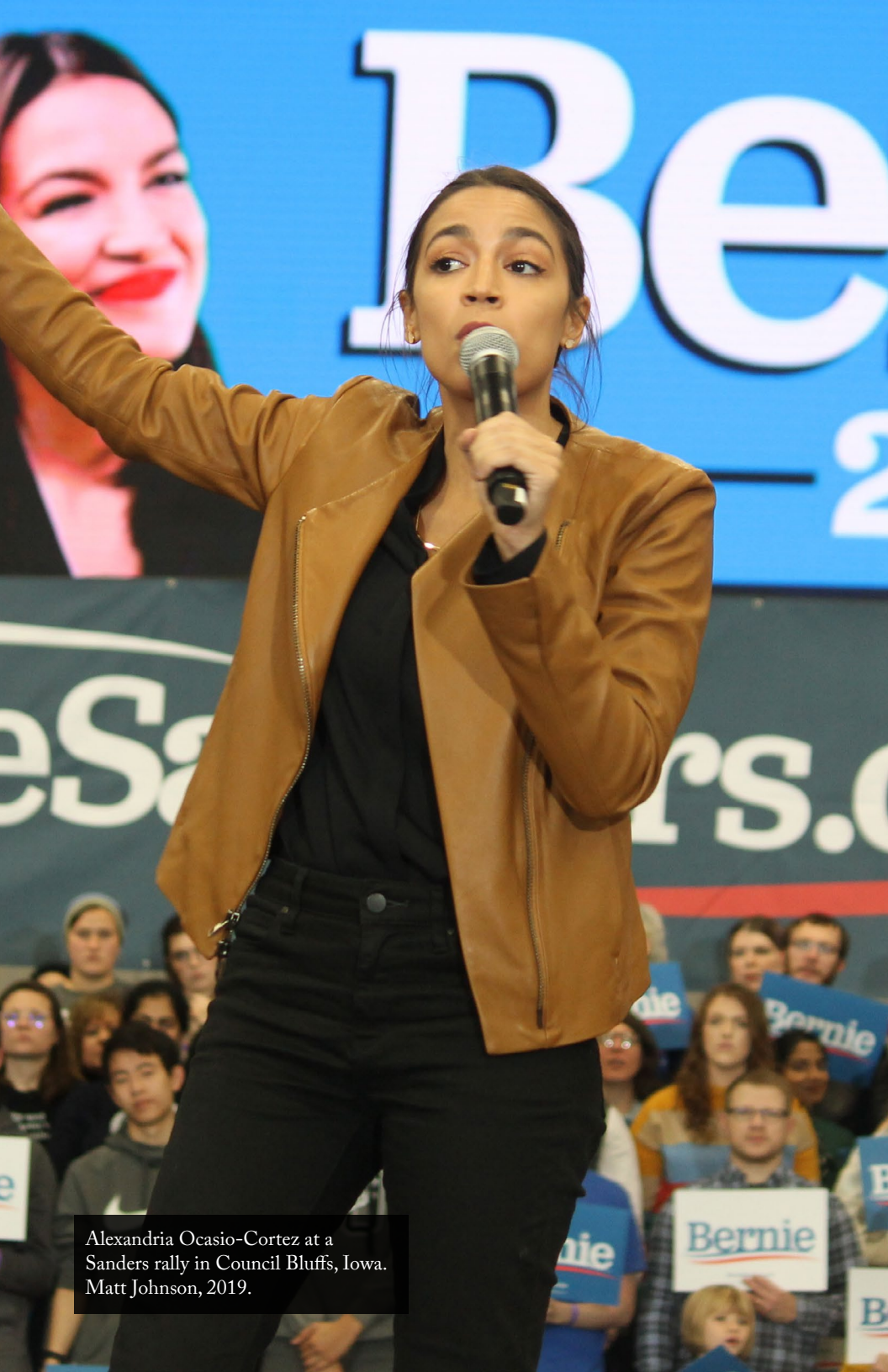
Clearly, one of the key questions moving forward is, What kind of power do we need to build to increase our class' ability to directly challenge the rule of capital where we live and where we work? Electoral activity, despite what happened in 2016, does not automatically translate into the types of self-organization and self-activity needed to open new fronts for class struggle. Where, for instance, is the class organization that will apply this kind of pressure to ensure that a truly radical Green New Deal is enacted? If this organization does not already exist, how we can throw all of our resources to bring it into being?

What will the DSA do to ensure that our activity around Bernie 2020 amounts to more than just a mass canvassing operation that steers people back into the spectacle that is Democratic Party politics? What will our organization do to avoid resurrecting the sort of email-listserv politics that characterized the anti-war movement

during the Bush era, to avoid DSA becoming a “moveon.org” for the Twitter generation? What sort of political education can we offer to fuel peoples’ new curiosity about socialism? How can we inoculate ourselves against the attractions of opportunistic politicians? These are the questions that should guide our strategic orientation toward whatever activity we engage in, whether that be the Sanders campaign, labor organizing, tenant organizing, anti-racist organizing, or any of the other political projects DSA members are involved in.

In 2016, Sanders called for a political revolution. It was inspiring. But the paradox of a revolution is that it always leaves behind the conditions that spark it. We can take inspiration from the past and use what tools we’ve got in the present, but building a different future is on us. We can’t wait until we have all the answers, of course, but let’s start asking the right questions. •

This article was originally published in the summer 2019 issue of New Politics, and is online at newpol.org/issue_post/beyond-bernie/.



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez at a Sanders rally in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Matt Johnson, 2019.

THREE MEASURES AGAINST RACIST POLICING

April M. Short

Protesters against police brutality and racism have gathered to demand systemic change since the end of May, holding events in all 50 US states and around the world. Impelled by the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, the protests amplify a long-standing call by social justice organizations, Black civil rights leaders like Angela Davis and many others for decades: dismantle, defund and/or abolish America's racist and heavily militarized policing systems – and replace them with community-led safety programs and public health initiatives. The movement's leadership has made it clear that the protests, many of which have been non-violent due to community participation, are calling for more than updates to existing police training programs or reforms within existing police departments. Rather, they are calling for America to rethink the response to crime and safety overall. They are calling for cities to reallocate funding away from police and begin the steps to gradually dismantle the policing system altogether, as Eric Levitz writes in a recent *New York Magazine* article.

The police response to the protests against police brutality in many cities has been markedly, and ironically, brutal, as is discussed in detail in a recent article by Adam Gabbatt in *The Guardian*. Many videos and reports from recent protests show police using violent force against peaceful protesters. Dounya Zayer spoke with *Democracy Now!* about the police officer who violently pushed her to the ground when she was peacefully protesting, which she said resulted in a concussion and a trip to the hospital. Across the US, police have arrested more than 10,000 protesters and have repeatedly attacked journalists covering the protests, including Linda Tirado, who has been partially blinded after the police shot her with a foam bullet in the eye.

Meanwhile, the protests are successfully pushing officials across



Protests in San Francisco following the police murder of George Floyd. Quinn Norton, 2020.

the country to respond in some tangible ways. Cities, counties, states and some police precincts across the nation are implementing changes, small and large, and the moment has brought the deep-seated problems of the policing systems into the mainstream conversation.

Demanding Far-Reaching Justice and Systemic Changes

On June 12, amid the mass protests against police killings, police in Atlanta shot and killed a 27-year-old Black man named Rayshard Brooks. Atlanta police chief Erika Shields immediately fired the officer after the fatal shooting of Brooks, and the officer is now facing murder charges. The autopsy report listed Brooks' manner of death as a homicide. Atlanta's Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms has ordered changes to the police use-of-force policy following the incident. The immediate firing of the officer and response of the mayor – while small steps – both speak to the work of the protests. In the past, many police killings of Black men and boys have gone undisciplined or resulted in a period of paid leave or slight demotion of the officers responsible. Since the death of Brooks, protesters have been filling the streets of Atlanta to demand more far-reaching justice and systemic changes.

The protests are beginning to push public dialogue to question long-held assumptions about what the safety of the future can look like. The US is starting to reckon with its systemic racism in an unprecedented way. Boston's Mayor Marty Walsh recently declared racism a public health crisis. Because of the protests, several US cities have also started to defund their police programs and reallocate those funds for other public services.

Following public pressure after the wrongful police killing of Breonna Taylor, in which police stormed the house of the 26-year-old medical worker in the middle of the night on March 13 and shot her to death, Louisville has passed Breonna's Law to ban no-knock police warrants in the city (though the officers responsible have not been charged for Taylor's murder yet).

There is some concern among protest organizers that changes enacted now could be short-lived, and eventually lead back to the same old cycles of oppression and inequity. Alicia Garza, the principal of Black Futures Lab, the director of strategy and partnerships for the National Domestic Workers Alliance and a co-founder of the women's activist group Supermajority, said in a *New York Times* Q&A discussion recently that "political will over the long term" will be necessary in order for real change.

"I think there is a danger now that when protests start to die down, which they always do, when the blue-ribbon panel is dismantled, which it always is, Black communities won't necessarily be in a more powerful place than where we started," she said in the *New York Times* interview. "The country has to deeply invest in the ability of Black communities to shape the laws that govern us."

Which policy changes and actions can actually restructure the US's problematic policing and justice systems? Here are a few of the concrete changes that leading organizers are calling for, with the potential to shift how policing, safety and justice systems operate in the future.

1. Defund and demilitarize the police and reallocate those funds into community-based programs like safe housing, social care programs and public health.

Many police budgets in the US are disproportionately bloated when compared with other tax-supported social services. The nationwide trend over recent decades has been to gradually increase police bud-

gets, while schools, welfare programs and other public services have encountered widespread budget cuts. As the original Black Lives Matter protests that began in Ferguson in 2014 brought to light, police in this country – even in smaller precincts – are heavily militarized. Angela Davis pointed this out in a recent interview, in which she discussed how America’s “police departments are the most dramatic expression of structural racism.”

Calls by organizers to defund the police make it clear that defunding is just the first in a multistep movement to dismantle policing as we know it. But it’s an important starting point, as it has the capability to free up needed resources for community-based social services and public health services.

Several cities – some of them for the first time – have started to take that first step and reduce their police budgets, to varying degrees. For example, in Austin, the city council on June 11 voted to reinvest police funds and restrict use of force after recent police violence against protesters sent at least 31 people to the hospital. San Francisco’s Mayor London N. Breed also announced a new plan on June 11 under which the city will redirect some of its police funds into organizations that serve communities that have been harmed by systematic racism, and police will no longer respond to non-criminal calls or use military-grade weapons and gear. New York’s Mayor Bill de Blasio has promised for the first time to cut funding for the NYPD. Portland plans to decrease its police budget by \$15-million.

It’s notable that many cities are now cutting police funding, especially since prior to the protests many of those same cities were set to increase police budgets this year. That said, defunding is just a small first step to rein in a long-militarized, violent and racist system. Brie McLemore outlines the need to do more than defund the police, in a recent *Truthout* article in which she argues for the abolition of police.

A stronger shift that comes closer to the changes protests are calling for is coming out of Minneapolis, Minnesota, where George Floyd’s murder led to the first of the recent protests against police brutality. The Minneapolis City Council has vowed to eliminate its current police department and replace it with a new model of community-led safety programs. The city is also working with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights on an investigation into the Minneapolis Police Department over the last decade. The

department has received numerous complaints about the racially targeted and brutal treatment of citizens, and has repeatedly failed to hold cops accountable for their actions. Meanwhile, community organizers in the city are already implementing programs, led by community members that rethink safety, as outlined in a *Truthout* op-ed by Jae Hyun Shim.

Aqeela Sherrills is an organizer who has been working to shift the conversation around safety and violence in America for more than three decades. He has been working with cities on the ground to replace over-policing with community-led safety programs. He is a senior adviser to the Alliance for Safety and Justice (ASJ), which works with several states to replace over-incarceration with crime prevention, community health, rehabilitation and crime-survivor support programs. He is also the co-founder of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice (CSSJ), which is a project of ASJ and a national nonprofit network of crime survivors, working to replace criminal justice and prison system waste with community-based initiatives. Sherrills has been working for six years with the city of Newark, New Jersey, to implement many of the systemic changes that protesters are currently calling for. The implementation of community-led strategies has meant notable drops in crime rates throughout Newark, which is historically high in crime.

Sherrills was at the helm of a groundbreaking peace treaty between the Bloods and the Crips in Watts, Los Angeles, in 1992. He says to successfully bring about crime reduction and safety, it's essential to rethink the way people view and speak about criminality. What his experience has taught him is that the best approach is to treat violence as a public health issue, and work with actual community leaders on safety programs – and in high-crime areas, those leaders can be ex-convicts or gang members, as he details in a recent interview with the Independent Media Institute.

Sherrills says in the interview that urban street-gang wars are what many social justice activists call, “the longest-running war in the history of this country.” But, he says, the survivors and victims of that war have been criminalized rather than met with supportive services to heal the traumas and impacts of violence.

“We didn’t give ourselves that label [of gang]. That label was meant to dehumanize the person behind it, and desensitize the public to the plight of these youth and young adults who were growing

up in these war zones. Instead of providing healing services, they provided a criminal justice solution to what was a public health challenge,” Sherrills said. “My whole adult life, I’ve been committed to shifting narratives around victimization and redefining public safety with the idea that we have to put the public back into public safety... Today, we’re at an inflection point. We have a real opportunity that’s ahead of us. There’s a national campaign to defund police.”

While Sherrills is not an advocate of completely getting rid of the police, he has long worked toward reallocating significant portions of police funding into community programs. And the programs he has helped to build offer real-life proof of how community-based safety can be more effective than police in reducing crime. During recent protests, for example, the city of Newark has kept its police to the sidelines, away from people protesting, and it demilitarized the police by prohibiting riot gear and military-grade attire and weapons. The city deployed its organized and trained community groups to help keep things safe and civil. As a result, Newark has not had reports of police brutality seen in many other American cities, and they’ve had weeks of peaceful protests without looting or serious property damage.

“We deployed the [Newark Community Street Team], the West Ward Victims Outreach [Services], the Newark Anti-Violence Coalition, the mayor’s Brick City Peace Collective – these are all residents of the city,” Sherrills said. “We weaved ourselves through every single portion of the march.”

2. Remove all police from schools.

Reinvest in counseling and education instead.

In Portland, Oregon, Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero recently vowed to remove all school resource officers – police officers deployed to work at schools – from the district’s schools. This is something the city council’s only Black member, Jo Ann Hardesty, has been urging for years, as in-school officers disproportionately arrest Black students. Portland is not alone. Superintendents in Seattle, Minneapolis and Denver have vowed to end their school officer programs for similar reasons, and the disproportionate arrests of Black students in schools is a nationwide issue. Public pressure around the topic continues to build in many cities.

Many civil rights groups and organizers – including promi-

nent teachers unions in Los Angeles, Chicago and elsewhere – have been calling throughout the recent protests to remove police from schools. While most programs to bring police into schools were enacted in response to school shootings, there is a lack of evidence to show that they actually increase safety. There is, however, ample evidence that they make life harder for Black kids, as discussed in a recent New York Times article.

Many of the teachers' groups and civil rights groups now calling to remove cops from schools have been doing so for years. The civil rights groups Advancement Project and the Alliance for Educational Justice released a joint report in 2018 that outlines the reasons removing police from schools is a step to improve school safety. As the report authors note in the introduction, the report "centers the voices of young people from around the country who describe the everyday indignities that they experience at the hands of school police. It also, for the first time, catalogues known assaults of young people by school police officers."

The report explores the impacts of school police on students of color and Black communities in particular, and notes that in the two decades following the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, school discipline has grown increasingly punitive and has failed to increase safety in schools, especially for students of color.

"Safety does not exist when Black and Brown young people are forced to interact with a system of policing that views them as a threat and not as students," the report authors write. "The report calls for the removal of police from schools and envisions schools where Black and Brown students are afforded the presumption of childhood that they deserve."

While police budgets have been steadily rising for the last decade across the nation, education budgets have been slashed across the nation. The powerful union United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) has come out vocally in favor of the movement to eliminate police in the city's schools, as the *LA Times* reports. Cecily Myart-Cruz, the incoming president of UTLA, reportedly told the *Times*, "We have to dismantle white supremacy. We must... defund the police and bring in the mental health services that our students need."

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has been outspoken against police programs in schools for years due to the many racial disparities inherent in those programs. The ACLU's website

shows the negative impacts of these programs on Black and Brown students in particular. The website states:

“Though these police are often referred to as ‘school resource officers,’ their legal power and attending actions reveal that this designation only serves to mask that their presence has transformed schools into another site of concentrated policing. Such policing marks the start of the school-to-prison pipeline – the entry point to the criminal justice system for too many kids – and fuels mass incarceration.”

3. Decriminalize people for surviving.

In addition to calling for changes to policing itself, many activists who are seeking to end the problems associated with police brutality are also advocating for other reforms that decriminalize people for surviving. This means legally decriminalizing sex work, drug use and possession, homelessness and asylum-seeking immigrants. Organizers are also calling to change the way survivors of violent crimes are often themselves criminalized because of the way the systems are set up.

A report released this year by Nina Luo, a fellow for Data for Progress, details the necessity to decriminalize sex work as a first step toward protecting sex workers, and a “part of effective anti-trafficking policy. ... Decriminalization includes amending penal codes and divesting from the criminal legal system (both police and prosecutors).”

Sex work is a relevant and mandatory part of the conversation around race and policing because entire police units, special undercover operations and significant resources are dedicated to policing sex work in the US. And, as the report notes, most often people who enter the sex trades do so out of economic desperation, in order to pay for their basic needs. Those sex workers are “often undocumented, women of color and/or young LGBTQ+ people who have little to no access to the justice system.” When these people are criminalized for attempting to survive via sex work, the “criminality” as a result of engaging in sex work entirely discredits them as ‘victims’ when they report rape or violence to police.”

A national poll conducted by Data for Progress, published in January, found that “an outright majority of... [US] voters support decriminalizing sex work.” In the report, Luo explains how crim-

inalizing sex work forces the trade underground, which ultimately endangers sex workers who might have been coerced into the trade, as they themselves could face charges if they speak about their work. The report also explains that sex workers enter the trade for a number of reasons – from choice to circumstance to coercion. And, again, most of them enter because of circumstance.

“Most sex workers trade sex out of circumstance to meet economic needs such as healthcare, housing or childcare,” the report says. “They may experience explicit discrimination in the formal economy because of disability, gender identity or immigration status and rely on sex work to meet basic needs. They may find parts of the sex industry to have low barriers of entry, allowing them to immediately access income for a short period of time in the industry before exiting. They may find that the freelance or independent nature of the work allows them more time flexibility to caretake families or pursue other interests.”

The report concludes with a reminder that criminalization has never effectively ended the sex trade, and that decriminalizing sex work is just a first step toward safety for people who do that work – and it’s the “only legal model that immediately reduces the harms of policing, incarceration, deportation, and criminal records in the lives of sex workers and trafficking survivors.”

As the US reckons with its long-standing racism and policies that enforce systemic inequalities, sex work and the criminalization of sex workers have to be part of the discussion. As Luo writes:

“Sex work is an issue of controversy because it forces us to reckon with the realities of economic, racial, and gender injustice. People trade sex for many reasons, but most often to meet basic needs, and until this economy affords everyone a home, a living wage job, healthcare, and education, many people will continue to trade sex for survival.”

As with sex work, the criminalization of drugs has been overtly ineffective and problematic. The four decades of the failed and innately racist US war on drugs are a systemic behemoth responsible for over-policing, primarily in non-white neighborhoods, and the mass incarceration that has disproportionately locked up Black and Brown people for decades. As the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA) wrote in a 2017 report calling for the decriminalization of drug use and possession:

“By any measure and every metric, the US war on drugs – a constellation of laws and policies that seeks to prevent and control the use and sale of drugs primarily through punishment and coercion – has been a colossal failure with tragic results. Indeed, federal and state policies that are designed to be ‘tough’ on people who use and sell drugs have helped over-fill our jails and prisons, permanently branded millions of people as ‘criminals’, and exacerbated drug-related death, disease and suffering – all while failing at their stated goal of reducing problematic drug use.”

Drug use is a public health issue, and it should be treated that way, as the DPA and many others have argued for years. Since Portugal, for example, made the groundbreaking decision to decriminalize all drugs in 2001 and turn drug use into a public health issue rather than a criminal one, the results have been overwhelmingly positive. Portugal’s opioid crisis, which was once among the worst in the world, quickly stabilized, and problematic drug use dropped significantly over the next several years. Hepatitis and HIV infection rates, overdose deaths, drug-related crime and incarceration rates also plummeted.

From the start, the war on drugs has targeted Black people, and other people of color, as author Michelle Alexander details in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. In a 2014 interview, with the beginning of state-by-state cannabis legalization, Alexander discussed a trend in the emerging cannabis industry in which white men were getting rich, but many Black men remained in prison – and they still do. Several petitions to free people who are still serving life sentences for minimal cannabis charges have gained steam in recent years.

Homeless people are also criminalized in America for trying to survive. As the National Coalition for the Homeless explains, “The criminalization of homelessness refers to measures that prohibit life-sustaining activities such as sleeping/camping, eating, sitting, and/or asking for money/resources in public spaces. These ordinances include criminal penalties for violations of these acts.”

In the US, more than half a million people are homeless, and protesters are calling for an end of the criminalization of homelessness, and reallocation of police and justice system funding into safe

housing programs to help people living on the streets.

And, among the conversations gaining some steam throughout the protests is the call to abolish US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Currently, the US is still holding asylum seekers who came to the US hoping to escape dangerous situations, in horrific, overcrowded and illegal detention camps along the US-Mexico border. Children have been separated from their parents, and thousands of them have reportedly been misplaced. Detainees, including children, are living in squalor, treated inhumanely, locked in cages and dying in detention centers. ICE is the policing agency responsible for the operation. Throughout the recent protests, a petition has been circulating to stop reported spraying of ICE detainees with a powerful and toxic disinfectant, which is reportedly a practice being enacted in detention centers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Protests are calling to do away with ICE and decriminalize asylum-seeking immigrants and all people who come to America looking for work and a better life.

In addition to decriminalizing the above sectors, protests are calling for the release of those currently incarcerated for these crimes. Some protesters are calling to take this further and begin to abolish the prison systems along with the police in order to bring about racial justice. The 2016 documentary film “13th” by director Ava DuVernay offers an in-depth breakdown of the racial disparities of prison systems, their ties to slavery and the continued oppression of Black Americans.

As a *Reuters* article reports, 40 per cent of the almost 2.3 million prisoners in the US are Black, while just 13 per cent of the US population is Black, according to the nonprofit Prison Policy Initiative. University of Ottawa associate professor of criminology Justin Piché told Reuters, “Something feels different this time,” in regard to the general response to recent protesters’ calls for racial justice. “Whether or not that actually translates into police defunding and more gains for prison abolition, that remains to be seen.” •

April M. Short is an editor, journalist and documentary editor and producer. She is a writing fellow at Local Peace Economy, a project of the Independent Media Institute. This article was produced by Local Peace Economy, a project of the Independent Media Institute, in June 2020. It is online at socialist-project.ca/2020/06/three-measures-against-racist-policing/.



Protesters in Oakland. Peg Hunter, 2020.

Part III.

NEW LABOUR FORMATIONS

THE POLITICAL REVOLUTION GOES TO WORK

Jane Slaughter

The term “political revolution” is an odd one. Bernie Sanders never said that voting for him or building his campaign would overthrow capitalism (the traditional meaning of “revolution” in the socialist movement). The idea was radical but vague. It was rightly inspirational while what was actually asked of us was within the sphere of voting and elections, and in the Democratic Party at that.

Let’s define “political revolution” very broadly as left electoral campaigns that raise transitional demands and seek to enfranchise the disenfranchised. Bernie’s campaign, as well as those of followers such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, called for radical reforms that the US system *could* grant – Medicare for All, free public college – but which it is profoundly unwilling to. Raising the demands raises the question “why not?” and lays the blame squarely on Bernie’s “billionaire class.”

My argument here is a simple one: If we want a powerful movement, workers have to fight their employers not just at the ballot box but at the workplace, too. These two kinds of struggle can complement each other; union fights, in particular, pose clear class battles that raise consciousness. In addition to this year’s electrifying teacher strikes, we can learn from three other large-scale union victories that took place in the year before Donald Trump was elected. Those victories happened where we might least expect them: in the old, blue-collar economy, where unions are down to 6.5 per cent of the workforce and workers are said to be on their way out. Yet at Chrysler, Verizon, and a huge Teamster pension fund, thousands of union members organized to put a stick in management’s eye.

Few believed such victories possible as neoliberalism advanced steadily under Democratic and Republican administrations alike. These were not pocket-sized shop-floor wins but confrontations with big-time capital, from which hundreds of thousands of workers and their families have benefited. Together with this year’s teach-



Cornel West and indigenous leader Deborah Parker at a rally in Washington DC.
Hillel Steinberg, 2016.

er rebellions, they show what unions must do if they are to rebuild in the post-*Janus* era, and in one case they show how electoral politics and a working class battle can fortify each other.

An Atmosphere of Resistance

Any left political project fares better in an atmosphere of general resistance. Elections come only so often. We need agitation throughout civil society, in workplaces, neighborhoods, churches, at ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) offices, on the National Mall in Washington. Compare what happens in a strike or even a contract campaign with what happens in an election. Even the best electoral campaigns, and we have seen some good ones recently, bend toward the lowest common denominator of political agreement. It's all about the candidate, who is supposed to perform superhuman feats once in office. The campaign asks almost no involvement from the vast majority of people it tries to reach, nothing more than lever-pulling on election day. Campaign volunteers are generally given scripts, not a chance to self-start; in fact, they're told to "stay on message." Their tactics are largely lim-

ited to phone banking, door-knocking, and social media.

Fights with the boss, in contrast, can allow workers maximum opportunity to use their smarts and creativity. They are forced to get outside their normal sphere of silent resentment and take risks. They defy normal authority. They invent slogans, they strategize to find the boss's weak points, and they plot escalating campaigns. They may confront scabs, they may break laws. They learn about power – what's arrayed against them and their own.

Workplaces and the unions that organize them are two of the very few institutions that are socially integrated, where people of different races and backgrounds are forced to work together to get the job done. As such they are prime arenas for getting past the racism that is the worst weakness of the US working class. In our three cases, workers could win only by putting interracial solidarity into practice. Regardless of how or whether they voted on election day, when it came to stopping givebacks workers stood together for a common goal.

Finally, fighting the boss can open workers up to left political ideas. Challenging authority sharpens the sense of class antagonism, and forging practical solidarity encourages love and friendship among one's fellow fighters.

These results aren't guaranteed, of course. Exit polls in 2016 showed 43 per cent of union household voters voting for Trump. Given the demographics of the teachers, Teamsters, telecommunications workers, and auto workers who won the fights described here, it's likely that many did in fact choose Trump – just as many likely backed Bernie in the Democratic primaries.

Political Revolt, Class Revolt

This is where socialists come in. When socialists are inside workers' fights, we can raise bigger ideas and counter bad ones. This is what happened in the historic wildcat strike of West Virginia teachers and school support workers last February. Sanders had swept all fifty-five counties in the 2016 Democratic Party primary, which put class politics in the air and prompted the growth of a Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) chapter in the state capital. When school workers walked out to save their health insurance, socialist teachers raised the idea that the money should come from a severance tax on the fossil fuel companies that had long exploited the

state's natural wealth.

Rallies at the capitol featured homemade signs demanding “Tax our gas!” and “Make a choice: Tax cuts for big business or health care for WV workers.” The legislature did not enact the tax, but the agitation made it impossible for politicians to drive a wedge between school workers and poor West Virginians by cutting services to pay for the raises they won. Rank-and-filers went on to compel the leaders of all three teachers’ unions to support the severance tax and oppose regressive taxes.

Another example of how political and class revolt can reinforce each other came during the 2016 primary season in New York, when a massive strike at Verizon coincided with the Sanders campaign. Communications Workers of America (CWA), the main union in the strike and one of the few to endorse Bernie, turned 150 strikers out for a Sanders rally on the strike’s first day. Sanders walked picket lines and blasted Verizon for destroying good jobs. When CEO Lowell McAdam called him “contemptible,” Sanders shot back: “I

If we want a powerful movement, workers have to fight their employers not just at the ballot box but at the workplace, too. These two kinds of struggle can complement each other.

don’t want the support of McAdam, [GE CEO Jeffrey] Immelt and their friends in the billionaire class. I welcome their contempt.” Verizon was demanding big increases in health insurance premiums, so Bernie’s combative rhetoric and his call for Medicare for All found a receptive audience among the strikers.

Media attention buoyed strikers, garnered public support for both Sanders and CWA, and framed the strike as an expression of political resistance to the billionaire class. Sanders’s stump speeches on corporate greed resonated because workers were directly confronting a major corporation on the streets. The strike showed how political agitation combined with workplace action can channel workers’ anti-establishment anger toward the left instead of toward right-wing demagoguery. This is, in fact, what happened throughout Bernie’s primary campaign. Trump said, “You’re getting screwed?

Punch down.” Bernie said, “You’re getting screwed? Join hands and together take on the billionaires like Trump.” His anti-corporate and pro-union campaign was strengthened when workers put his slogans into practice outside the electoral arena. It’s safe to assume that most of those strikers voted for Bernie.

Socialists Inside

The growth of DSA is good news at this juncture for the labor movement. While most DSA members (like most US workers) aren’t in unions, chapters and regional gatherings are holding classes to bring them up to speed.

Some members are reinvigorating a socialist plan of action for union work that was called the “Rank and File Strategy” in previous decades. The first step is getting a job in a union workplace. New York City DSA’s local convention recently resolved to help interested members find union jobs (preferably in groups), connect them with experienced activists, and work on strategies for their unions. A new pamphlet from Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) and the Democratic Socialist Labor Commission (DSLC) provides guidance for young members looking to become teachers, which would put DSAers in the heart of class struggles that are bound to erupt again.

Not Dead Yet

Like other public-sector workers, teachers will be hurt by the Supreme Court’s *Janus* decision, which will wreak serious damage on institutional labor. Janus makes the entire public sector right-to-work, with employees no longer required either to join the union that represents them or to pay a fee for that representation. As members quit, solidarity and finances will suffer.

But as the school worker rebellions showed us, workers need not be constrained by bad laws. The states where teachers went on strike in the first half of this year – West Virginia, Arizona, Kentucky, and Oklahoma – were already right-to-work, with no one obliged to join the union or pay fees. Public-sector strikes in all four states were illegal. In the first three, districts aren’t even required to bargain collectively with teachers. And yet these workers defied state laws to use labor’s oldest weapon, and they won overwhelming public backing and impressive raises. As Joe Burns, historian of the public employees’

strike wave of the 1960s and 1970s, writes: “Legality has a way of drifting into the background when workers organize *en masse*.”

Labor Notes published a special issue in July that showcases public- and private-sector unions that have maintained high membership rates in right-to-work states all along. They’ve done so by inculcating the idea that “the union” is a living and breathing presence at work every day, not just the headquarters and its staff. It’s “me and my co-workers keeping supervisors in line, enforcing our right to take breaks, making sure the new hires are welcomed and schooled.” An organization whose members know what it feels like to exercise power is an organization that workers will join, open shop or not.

Of course, such small-scale shop floor fights aren’t enough to defend workers as a class. They are the precondition for workers wanting to belong to unions and for gaining confidence that they can take on their employers. Then those unions can lead much bigger battles. At their best, these are waged on behalf of a larger constituency, as when nurses fight for smaller nurse-to-patient ratios in hospitals, or transit workers defend bus service, or when UPS Teamsters – a majority of them part-timers – sought public support for their strike for full-time jobs.

Campaigns in the private sector can be an essential part of the political revolution when they raise consciousness and seek solidarity around issues that affect our whole class. That’s the difference between a purely bread-and-butter campaign where workers go it alone and one that shows how we’re all in it together against a common class enemy.

Road Map to Resistance

The Chrysler, Teamster, and Verizon blue-collar upsurges all succeeded because of bottom-up initiatives. They also all had roots in union reform movements. The Verizon workers explicitly connected themselves to Sanders’s electoral campaign, to the benefit of each. The other two fights were missing the explicitly political link, but it’s easy to imagine how their unions could have opened their battles to supporters and asked for solidarity based on common interests, as I’ll suggest below.

No to Two-Tier at Chrysler: Since 2007 new workers in Big Three auto plants had hired on at half pay and worked alongside veteran workers on the same jobs, destined never to match “legacy”

wages. Though United Auto Workers (UAW) leaders had told the Tier 2 workers in writing that their next contract, in 2015, would bring a section of them up to Tier 1 wages immediately, they reached an agreement with management that would continue the two-tier system indefinitely. The forty thousand Chrysler workers voted “no” nearly two-to-one. They forced union bargainers back to the table to negotiate a path to standard wages for all Tier 2 members.

No to Teamster Pension Cuts: Trustees of the mammoth Central States Pension Fund proposed to slash benefits for already retired workers by 50 to 60 per cent. In May 2016, 410,000 Teamsters, retirees, and their spouses in twenty-five states saw the fruits of two years of rank-and-file protests when a federal appointee bowed to their pressure and rejected the cuts. Two years on, retirees are still getting their full benefits.

No to Harassment and Outsourcing at Verizon: In 2016, thirty-nine thousand Verizon workers from Massachusetts to Virginia struck against the outsourcing of call center jobs, forced transfers to other states, and harassment and micromanagement of technicians. They ended their forty-five-day strike when management backed down from those practices, raised wages and pensions, added 1,300 union jobs, and granted first contracts at seven Verizon retail stores.

What Went Right?

The movements that produced these three victories shared one characteristic: grassroots action by tens of thousands of rank-and-file members. Not clever PR campaigns, not lobbying, not photo ops, but union members defying corporate power in big numbers. At Chrysler and the Teamsters pension fund, members were forced to organize against their own union officials as well. This was not an advantage, but it did ensure that workers weren’t hemmed in by excessive concern for courtesy or company profits.

Each time, the victories were partial. The improved Chrysler contract includes more use of temporary workers. The Teamster pension fund’s red ink still flows, and it still needs Congress to authorize a loan (Sanders has introduced a bill to do so). Verizon workers made concessions on health care costs.

Still, these workers can be proud of what they blocked and what they won. How did they beat the odds?

Power in Numbers

Workers in all three fights turned out big numbers for whatever they did.

At Chrysler, fired-up rank and filers generated tactics, confidence, and excitement through a plethora of Facebook groups where they posted contract details, pictures of their “no” ballots, and local vote results.

Members showed up *en masse* at union meetings and badgered the officials sent to sell the deal. They made “No More Tiers” T-shirts and wore them into the plants. A few dozen Detroit workers held a Vote No rally at UAW headquarters.

Teamster retirees formed local “Committees to Protect Pensions” in twenty cities, along with sixty Facebook pages. Retirees held letter-writing drives, visited congresspeople, and even picketed a newspaper to get a reporter’s attention.

Mass meetings of 300, 500, 800, 1200 were held from Milwaukee to Kansas City. At some, a government official got an earful about what the cuts would mean. Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and the Pension Rights Center helped to organize the work, and two thousand retirees from twenty states rallied in Washington in April 2016.

Verizon workers, too, turned out in big numbers: five hundred and eight hundred greeted the CFO and CEO, respectively, when they appeared at corporate conferences. The *Good Morning America* show hosted 250 strikers in their red T-shirts, and a rally in midtown Manhattan brought out 8,000 red shirts.

Hurt Profits

But the Verizon strikers also did the traditional thing a strike is supposed to do – stop work from getting done and disrupt profits.

Many strikes these days are “publicity strikes” involving one day on the picket line. The Verizon workers, in contrast, put up roving pickets every day. They harassed scabs and managers to make it difficult or impossible for them to install and repair phone lines. Verizon had to tell new fiber optic customers they would wait three or four months for service.

CWA didn’t hesitate to use rowdy tactics. When the company boarded scabs at hotels, strikers organized “wake-up calls” outside their windows in the wee hours of the morning. Locals recruited

other unions and community groups (some as far away as California) to adopt Verizon retail stores to picket. Strikers recruited New York health care unions for a day of action to protest Verizon's cutting off health benefits.

Verizon workers earn far above the blue-collar norm. Strikers who'd been worried about public resentment reported honks of support and picket-line deliveries of pizza and coffee instead. Meanwhile, CWA members had a strike fund behind them, with benefits of \$200-\$300 a week and a promise to pay medical bills. As the strike wore on, analysts predicted hundreds of millions of dollars in lost profits. Verizon caved, and the strikers won.

How to Make a Fight Political

The Chrysler workers, whose rank-and-file fight against two-tier was spontaneous, simply didn't have the resources to take it public as the Verizon workers did. We have another model, though, for what such a campaign – in the private sector, on behalf of particular workers – could have looked like. In 1997 the reform leadership of the Teamsters took on UPS with a two-week strike for full-time jobs, under the slogan "Part-Time America Won't Work!" Members not only stopped UPS's profit machine, they also were organized to speak to the press and to go out and talk with their regular customers. A Gallup poll showed the public supporting the strikers by a two-to-one margin.

If the UAW had wanted public support against Chrysler, how about a slogan like "Two-Tier America Won't Work"? The union could have appealed to other workers' basic sense of fairness – and to their experiences with two-tier wage systems in their own workplaces – to bring political and consumer pressure to bear on Chrysler. GM and Chrysler worked hard to convince the public that they deserved the massive 2009 federal auto bailout. The union could have taken its case against two-tier to the public, too, but it didn't do so.

This is the kind of outward-facing campaign with class-wide demands the Left should support as part of the political revolution we're fighting for.

Size Matters

After *Janus* it's not surprising to hear the view, from labor's friends and foes alike, that existing union members are dinosaurs, conces-

sions are inevitable, and the labor movement is on its way out. Some have argued that labor's best hope is to focus on the most vulnerable workers (i.e., fast-food workers, Uber drivers), though it's not clear why they should want to hop on a sinking ship. "Alt-labor" theorists have spilled much ink about the advantages of worker centers, a much looser form of organization that generally recruits immigrants in low-paid jobs.

But these three battles show that the raw material is still there for big fights led by private-sector unions, those with the power to stop production in the heart of the economy.

Democracy Matters

These fights also showcase the fruits of union democracy movements.

In the UAW, where modern concessions began in 1979, each new round of union-agreed givebacks has been met by a wave of worker resistance, reaching a high point in the 1980s in the New Directions Movement. Victor Reuther, a UAW founder, even came out of retirement to help lead the fight against company-union collaboration. These earlier protesters won members the right to an informed vote, so that the entire 2015 contract was available online.

Today there is not much organization in the UAW between contracts, but the legacy of resistance survives in rank-and-filers' belief that they have a right to say "No." The Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), founded in 1976, is now the only substantial national union reform movement. Tactical, logistical, and networking assistance from TDU was critical to the retirees' organizing. The opposition movement is going strong: In the November 2016 election for top officers, dissidents won a slim majority among US members, falling behind to 48.5 per cent only because of voters in Canada. Teamster president James Hoffa was soundly outvoted in the 25 states that belong to the Central States Pension Fund.

And in the CWA, the flagship Verizon local in New York was led by reformers who pushed national officers to call the open-ended strike, after a failed two-week strike in 2011. It helped that CWA activists from all over had built prior connections at the day-long meetings they hold at the national conference of *Labor Notes*, the magazine founded to give voice to union reform movements.

Power of a Good Example

Fights like these inspire others to want unions of their own. Even former AFL-CIO president John Sweeney saw the recruitment power of workers acting on their own behalf. When the Teamsters beat UPS in 1997, Sweeney said, “You could make a million house calls and run a thousand television commercials and stage a hundred [farmworker] strawberry rallies, and still not come close to doing what the UPS strike did for organizing.”

Such a stance was unusual for Sweeney and for most top union leaders today, who typically prefer to make concessions to powerful employers rather than mobilize members for a fight. But in today’s open-shop America, using union power is the best way to inspire existing members to stay in and to inspire more workers to join.

Much of the post-*Janus* discussion has centered on the harm that will be done to unions’ political operations as members quit and treasuries are depleted. Anti-union forces have crowed that they can convince 5 to 20 per cent of union members to leave, their goal being to hamstring unions’ ability to get out the vote for Democrats.

Unions are preparing scripts for staffers, arming them to convince members to opt in by comparing the cost of dues to that of a cup of latte. At this year’s *Labor Notes* conference, Massachusetts Teachers Association President Barbara Madeloni reminded us that if union leaders rely only on arguments about what the union “provides” to members, they’ll lose. But if they enable members to experience the power of a union, Madeloni said, appeals to quit won’t hold water, because you can’t argue away the feeling that comes from using power.

Workers who are uniting to confront power on their own behalf become open to left politics, if those politics are on the table. It’s our job to make sure both are happening. •

Jane Slaughter is a former editor of Labor Notes, a co-author of Secrets of a Successful Organizer, and a member of the Detroit DSA chapter. This article was originally published in fall 2018 by Socialist Forum at socialistforum.dsausa.org/issues/fall-2018/the-political-revolution-goes-to-work/.

TEACHERS' STRIKES

A New Class Politics Emerging

Eric Blanc



Teachers demonstrate in Milwaukee. Charles Edward Miller, 2018.

In the spring of 2018, teachers and school staff across the United States fought back and won. By walking out for better pay and school funding, hundreds of thousands of educators etched their imprint onto the course of history. The strike wave sparked by West Virginia produced a range of major victories. It also produced some great stories. While interviewing school employees during and after the walkouts, I'd always make sure to ask about their favorite moment of the struggle so far.

Some recounted the exhilaration of personally confronting a conservative politician. Many emphasized how proud they were of

having become an organizer. Others told me about the joy of their first day back at school, when students thanked and high-fived them for taking a stand. More than a few were just relieved that they could now pay the rent.

I was particularly moved by stories about small acts of support from strangers. Abby Broome, a teacher in Putnam County, West Virginia, wrote to me about one such experience. Her letter poignantly describes how the strike imbued routine interactions with a spirit of solidarity:

“I was walking to my car probably 4 or 5 blocks from the state capitol. I was alone, have to admit kind of insecure as I’m a young woman and I was alone in unfamiliar territory and it was getting late. I was wearing my strike sign around my neck, had on my red bandana and red strike shirt. I passed a bus stop where a couple people were waiting for the shelter. Under different circumstances, I don’t think any of us would have acknowledged each other. (We should have.) But this time one of the men spoke and said, ‘I support you. It’s awesome what you all are doing. Keep fighting.’

“Honestly, I was shocked. For weeks we had been ridiculed by some of our elected officials, the media, our own governor. But I learned that night that we had the support of hardworking people who know the struggle, working people probably having to take the city bus to work, people who fight every day to make ends meet, people who truly cared about what we were doing. It really changed things for me. I was tired like everyone else. I wanted things to get back to normal. But I felt energized and respected like I never had. I was proud. We were doing something bigger than ourselves. I think we were giving other people a little hope.”

Giving Hope

West Virginia’s walkout gave hope to working-class people well past state lines. Inspired by the Mountain State strikers, school employees in Oklahoma, Arizona, and beyond followed suit. Confounding

all expectations, these actions erupted in Republican-dominated regions ('red states') with relatively weak labor unions, bans on public sector strikes, and electorates that voted for Donald Trump in 2016. And considering the fall 2018 work stoppages in Washington and a looming strike in Los Angeles, there is no sign that this militant educator upsurge will be short lived – nor confined to so-called red states.

This is a book [*Red State Revolt*] about the power of strikes. It tells the story of the thousands of educators like Abby Broome who took workplace action for the first time and were profoundly transformed in the process. It's also a behind-the-scenes account of how militant teacher-organizers – most of them young radicals inspired by the 2016 Bernie Sanders presidential campaign – initiated these illegal rank-and-file rebellions and guided them to victory in alliance with their trade unions.

Finally, this book is an attempt to extract the main political lessons of the 2018 upsurge, the first wave of US work stoppages in multiple generations. Our side doesn't win very often; for decades, workers, organized labor, and the Left have been losing a one-sided class war waged by billionaires and their apologists. If we want to build an effective alternative to Trump and the Far Right, we can't afford to ignore the experience of the red state revolt.

A Historic Upsurge

At most times and in most places, the norm is working-class resignation, rather than resistance. But the first few months of 2018 were one of those rare instances in US history when ordinary people forced their way into the political arena, seeking to take their destinies into their own hands. In so doing, they transformed themselves just as much as they shaped their workplaces and society.

To quote Oklahoma teacher Gabrielle Price, educators "took a crash course in politics and government and will never be able to unsee what they have seen." There is more than a little poetic justice in the fact that many strikers belonged to the "white working class" that liberal elites blamed for Trump's election.

Teacher after teacher recounted to me epiphanies produced in the heat of struggle, ranging from disillusionment in Republican politicians to a newfound sense of individual and collective power. In the words of one Arizona educator: "Rallying at the capitol

was one of few moments in my lifetime where I felt I stood exactly where one ought to – it was unequivocally purposeful, courageous and joyful.”

Teachers and support staff were not the only ones to reach new political conclusions. Millions of workers in each of these states witnessed a major social battle in which workers, for once, came out on top. A whole generation of young people, in particular, just learned firsthand that mass action is both legitimate and effective. To quote Oklahoma high school student Ravi Patel, “Our teachers are setting an example of bravery by standing up to ignorance and inaction ... Our teachers are setting a better example than our legislators have for the past decade.”

Stepping Up and Rocking the Boat

To make these strikes a success, rank-and-file educators were obliged to step up in dozens of ways. Though labor unions played an important role in the walkouts, movement activities were often improvised from below, with all the strengths and limitations that this entailed. Their contributions included unglamorous tasks like making signs, collecting food for students, reading up on legislation, speaking with confused parents, texting a coworker to remind them to participate in the strike vote, or driving a group of peers to the capitol. Other actions required a bigger leap; for many teachers, this was the first time they’d made a speech at a rally, convinced coworkers to participate in a political action, spoken to the press, chaired a mass meeting, or confronted a politician.

In the span of a few months, tens of thousands of educators confronted and overcame personal fears, physical exhaustion, Republican bullying, and employer disciplinary intimidation. Initially, most doubted that a work stoppage was possible, because public sector strikes are prohibited in each of these states. As teacher Rebecca Garelli recalls, “People in Arizona were scared to rock the boat – and then West Virginia happened. All of a sudden, the catalyst was there. ‘They’re doing it, why can’t we?’”

Though breaking the law was not a decision easily undertaken, teachers eventually embraced their defiance. Highlighting the long tradition of taking illegal action to win a righteous cause, many strikers made homemade signs that read, “Rosa Parks was not wrong.” One West Virginia teacher posted the following to Facebook: “The

way I look at it, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. took a stand, I'd be in great company [if the state tries to throw us in jail]."

Legal threats were not the only ordeals they faced. In West Virginia, educators rallied for hours in the frigid rain; in Arizona, they marched and demonstrated in ninety-five-degree heat. Many also stressed the emotional turmoil associated with their participation in such a political rollercoaster. According to Azareen Mullins: "Our feelings were extreme from one minute to the next because of things that were happening inside the capitol doors. You'd feel exhilarated next to your chanting coworkers, but the very next moment you'd be crushed because of disappointing news from the Legislature. And then it'd start all over again."

Specter of Labor Unrest

The Supreme Court's anti-union *Janus* decision in June 2018 – throwing all public employees back into the open shop era – has given the red state revolt an added degree of momentousness. Pundits across the political spectrum announced that *Janus* would be the nail in organized labor's coffin. But the walkouts clearly showed the potential for the revitalization of trade unions, even in the face of "right to work" laws and legal bans on strikes.

In fact, if the walkouts in Arizona, Oklahoma, and West Virginia are any indication, this Republican offensive may prove to be counterproductive for the ruling rich: by destroying the last remnants of public sector union security, the Supreme Court decision may thereby make militant workplace actions *more* likely. As a union lawyer for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) warned the court on February 26, *Janus* risked raising "an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country."

Though not all of their demands were met, striking educators in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona achieved more in the span of two months than had been won over the previous two decades. That they wrested these concessions from intransigent Republican administrations – who for years prior stubbornly insisted that there was no money available to meet the teachers' demands – made their achievements all the more significant. Both Oklahoma and Arizona, moreover, require legislative supermajorities to pass new taxes. Mass strikes have a remarkable knack for helping employers cough up

concessions.

In West Virginia, the push for a work stoppage forced the state to freeze healthcare costs, cancel the imposition of invasive mandatory medical trackers, and drop both pro-charter school and anti-union legislation. Then, after almost two weeks of shuttered schools, West Virginia's legislature caved to the strikers and granted a 5 per cent raise to *all* public employees – not only teachers. When I spoke with teacher leader Jay O'Neal in Charleston a few hours after victory was announced, he was ecstatic: "I'm thrilled, I feel like my life won't ever be the same again. It sounds like hyperbole, but it's not."

The gains won in Arizona were also impressive. Through two months of mobilization and six school days of strikes, the 'Red for Ed' movement put sufficient pressure on the legislature to stop new proposed tax cuts, keep an anti-voucher referendum on the 2018 ballot, and win hundreds of millions of dollars in additional school funding. Teachers, moreover, obliged the state to grant them an immediate raise of roughly 10 per cent, with the promise of another similar increase a few years down the line. No less importantly, Arizona's strike reversed Governor Doug Ducey's attempt to tie any funding increase to cuts from Medicaid, the arts, and students with disabilities.

The achievements of the red state walkouts were not limited to the formal policy arena. Even more important than gains in pay and funding were the advances toward revitalizing the trade unions and rebuilding a militant workers' movement. The illegal strikes in West Virginia and Arizona reflected, and spurred, a dramatic increase in working-class consciousness and organization, setting the stage for the conquest of further victories in the months and years ahead. To quote Garelli: "The movement and the walkout really increased people's political awareness and our level of grassroots organization. Fifty per cent of the win here has been that we now have a strong, organized mass movement. And we're not going away. People now have the courage to fight."

In a marked reversal of fortunes for West Virginian organized labor, over 2,000 educators joined the unions in early 2018. Arizona – in which the union represented only 25 per cent of school employees before the strike – experienced an even deeper sea change. Roughly 2,500 new members have joined. On a Facebook thread

concerning the lessons of the strike, a teacher explained: “The word ‘union’ does not scare me anymore. I joined [the Arizona Education Association] and plan on continuing to fight for what is right for educators and students. I feel the most empowered I have ever felt as an educator and now do believe that change is possible.”

Reversal of Trends?

This revolt shares important similarities with the last great round of rank-and-file radicalism in the United States, the strike wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s. But there are some critical differences. Whereas labor struggles four decades ago came in the wake of a postwar economic boom and the inspiring successes of the civil rights movement, this labor upheaval has erupted in a period of virtually uninterrupted working-class defeats and neoliberal austerity. As such, political scientist Corey Robin was right to call 2018’s educator upsurge the “most profound and deepest attack on the basic assumptions of the contemporary governing order.”

The stakes are high. Public education remains one of the few remaining democratically distributed public goods in the United States. For that very reason, corporate politicians have done everything they can to dismantle and privatize the school system. As political economist Gordon Lafer documents in his book *The One Percent Solution*, this isn’t only about immediate profits. Big corporations, he writes, are trying “to avoid a populist backlash” against neoliberalism “by lowering everybody’s expectations of what we have a right to demand as citizens”:

“When you think about what Americans think we have a right to, just by living here, it’s really pretty little. Most people don’t think you have a right to healthcare or a house. You don’t necessarily have a right to food and water. But people think you have a right to have your kids get a decent education.”

Struggles to defend public education, in other words, have political implications that reach far beyond the schools themselves. Each of the teacher strikes raised the question of whether the tremendous resources of the richest country on earth should be used for meeting human needs or for deepening corporate profits. In a context marked by deepening social crisis and widespread popular anger, we should not underestimate the urgency of this issue. To

counter the racist fearmongering of Trump and his supporters, moral condemnations are not enough. A credible political alternative must be provided.

Since West Virginia's strike erupted in February 2018, it's become clear that a new labor movement is not only necessary, but possible. To quote Arizonan music teacher and Red for Ed organizer Noah Karvelis: "The types of attacks we've seen in Arizona are common to the working class across the whole country. If educators in Arizona could stand up and fight back, anybody can stand up and do the same."

To the surprise of all, this frontal challenge to austerity and neoliberalism came in the form of illegal statewide strikes in Republican "right to work" bastions. Since unions in these states were relatively weak and collective bargaining virtually nonexistent, the strikes took on an unusually volcanic and unruly form. In an unprecedented historical development, much of the organizing for these actions took place in secret Facebook groups where teachers could share their fears, hopes, personal stories, and action proposals (as well as countless silly memes). And with union officials reluctant to call for illegal mass action, rank and filers stepped into the leadership vacuum and filled it to the best of their abilities.

Lessons Learned

One of the main lessons from the red state revolt is that the Left needs labor just as much as labor needs the Left. Fortunately, socialists and the labor movement are beginning to overcome their decades-long divorce. In an interview conducted over celebratory beers, an hour after West Virginia strikers won their demands, Emily Comer – a socialist teacher, union member, and strike leader in Charleston – put it well: "If you have enough working people who are pushed to the breaking point, and who are angry about a specific grievance, then it's the duty of activists to let them know that they deserve better – and that their lives can get better if they take action on that issue. If you lead the way, people will respond."

This book describes the development of the strike wave through the words and perspectives not only of its rank-and-file participants, but also those of its main grassroots organizers. For both diplomatic and tactical reasons, activists in 2018 were reticent to publically speak about the internal conflicts that drove these movements for-

ward. As such, the full story of their development has not yet been made public.

To understand how I was able to get this insider's take, some background information might be helpful. Last spring, *Jacobin* magazine sent me to be its on-the-ground correspondent for the strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona. Truth be told, my journalistic credentials at that point were nonexistent. My parents are both union activists, and I was a high school teacher – and leftist public education organizer – in the Bay Area until 2017. Like so many of my colleagues, my meager teacher wages pushed me to go back to school; the strike wave popped off during my second semester as a doctoral student in sociology at New York University.

Upon arriving in each of the strike states, I'd immediately explain my personal-political background to the local organizers. I told them the truth, which was something to the effect of: "I've got to write some articles about what's going on, but, mostly, I want you all to win – so, please, put to me work if you can." Ultimately, I spent the bulk of my time organizing national solidarity for the strikers and talking politics with the core teacher activists over nightly beers.

The upshot was that, although I missed more than a few article deadlines for *Jacobin*, I ended up earning the trust of key rank-and-file leaders. They gave me access to their internal meetings, their secret Facebook groups, and even many of their personal texts. Without that inside information, there's no way this book would have been possible.

To supplement these personal observations and the abundant primary sources embodied in the Facebook groups, I scoured the local press and also interviewed over one hundred teachers, service personnel, organizers, students, union staffers and top officials, and superintendents. Politically, these individuals ranged from Trump supporters, to liberal trade unionists, to socialist cadre – and I suspect that each will agree and disagree with aspects of my analysis. Though this is an unabashedly partisan account, I've tried hard to remain scrupulously committed to the facts, fair to those I criticize, and critical of those I support.

And one final note on geography: this book deals with the West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona strikes, which were by far the most important actions of the spring 2018 red state movement. The strikes in these three states were multiday work stoppages, unlike

the one-day, mostly symbolic walkouts that took place in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Colorado. Likewise, I don't delve into the recent work stoppages in Washington and other blue states – these actions, developing as they did in Democratic-run regions where strikes are not illegal, merit their own separate study.

It's a welcome complication that by the time this book hits the shelves, there could very well be new educator struggles erupting in unexpected places throughout the United States. In the same way that teachers in West Virginia and Arizona learned from the successes of Chicago's 2012 school strike, the 2018 experience should be of considerable use to public education workers and their allies in these battles to come.

From Trump's vicious scapegoating to the looming threat of climate catastrophe, rays of political hope are few and far between. At this dangerous and volatile juncture in US history, it's easy to fall into despair. But the 2018 education strikes not only underscore the immense potential for mass working-class politics; they also provide important insights into how this latent power can be tapped.

Working people are angry and looking for alternatives to business as usual. In the least likely of circumstances, school employees in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona rose up and dealt a serious blow to the forces of reaction. For everyone across the country who is eager to do the same, there's no better place to start than by learning about the red state revolt. •

This article is an excerpt from the book Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics (Verso, 2019), and is also online at socialistproject.ca/2019/06/teachers-strikes-new-class-politics-emerging/.

GREEN NEW DEALS

Climate Movements and Labour Unions

Alleen Brown with Jane McAlevey



Wind turbines in Coachella, California. Bob Glennan, 2020.

The 2020 election is the first presidential race with climate at its center. Throughout the Democratic primary, the potential loss of good construction and fossil fuel industry jobs has helped prevent moderate Democratic candidates, including frontrunner Joe Biden, from taking policy positions that would aggressively confront the fossil fuel industry and the climate crisis. Whoever opposes Donald Trump in the general election will face a politics of climate denial built on an empty but alluring promise of job security in the oil, gas, and coal industries.

Jane McAlevey's most recent book, *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy*, was published in January.

She spoke with Alleen Brown of *The Intercept* about her work and debates about climate justice.

Alleen Brown (AB): In the Nevada Democratic debate, moderator Chuck Todd quoted a Pennsylvania labour leader who said, “If we end up with a Democratic candidate that supports a fracking ban, I’m going to tell my members that they either don’t vote or vote for the other guy.”

“What do you tell those workers?” the moderator asked.

Bernie Sanders responded by referring first to climate scientists’ dire projections, then added that his policies will create 20 million good-paying jobs. Elizabeth Warren said that we can have a Green New Deal and create infrastructure jobs tomorrow, then spoke of fossil fuel donations corrupting politics. Do you think these answers were sufficient?

Jane McAlevey (JM): I remember that moment in the debate so well. They really didn’t nail it. I was hoping that the first things out of their mouths would have been to guarantee that every worker in the fossil fuel economy holds onto the standard they have, as we raise millions more into standards like that, by putting a front-line priority on unionizing the jobs in the clean economy.

In the early 1970s, we started to move all the unionized jobs out of the US. As the capitalists are shifting the American dream jobs out of the US, they do a containment strategy. They create this union-busting consultant industry, and the capitalist class says, “We’re not going to allow the emerging sector, the service sector, to get unionized the way we allowed the manufacturing sector to get unionized.”

So when people talk about, “Oh we’re going to create this next new economy,” what do workers hear? “We’re going to lose all these good jobs, and we’re never going to have a union again,” because that’s the lived experience in this country.

AB: What do you think organizers should be doing right now to make sure a climate-friendly platform can win in a presidential race where Trump will argue that ending fossil fuel investment means lost jobs?

JM: The candidates themselves and all of their surrogates have to get better at the core message I’m describing. You have to get ahead of your opposition by saying all of the things they’re going to say, and then walk people through why it’s a lie.

So if I’m the candidate on stage, I’m going to lead by saying,

“I understand that in the United States the same corporations that have been destroying the planet have collaborated to make it so that most American workers no longer have good, unionized jobs.” You lead by inoculating, by saying, “I understand that when I talk about the transition to a clean economy, it seems really hard to believe for most American workers, for most ordinary people, because it’s not their lived experience.” Lead with that, and then offer a credible plan for how it’s going to be different.

AB: You’ve said that “progressive environmentalists have yet to prove they can move from rhetoric to reality about good, unionized green jobs.” How do we get there?

JM: Part of having a credible plan to win means I can walk workers through examples of when workers like them took the following six steps, it met the expectation of what they’re hoping for. So part of the problem right now is that there’s very few examples of being able to say that. If I was doing this work, I would have to reach into Denmark to talk about where workers transitioned well. The New York wind deal got us a hell of a lot closer to having a real example.

AB: Can you talk me through the New York wind deal and why it’s so key?

JM: In New York, the unions won a far-reaching climate agreement to shift half of New York State’s total energy needs to wind power by 2035. They did it by moving billions of subsidies away from fossil fuels and into a union jobs guarantee known as a project labour agreement. When I interviewed a bunch of the key trade union players, I said, “At the end of the day, how did the environmental movement help get to the victory in the state legislature?” And they said, “Well, they didn’t.”

The context for the opening in New York was Hurricane Sandy. A lot of workers in the building and construction trades and things that relate to fossil fuels had their families impacted. And then more workers were called in to do the infrastructure rebuilding and urgent repair work.

Then you had some political vision among trade unionists who said, “Wow, what led to this Hurricane Sandy crisis?” So instead of just running to get rebuilding work, they began to raise broader questions. And the initial part was they tried to dialogue with some of the environmental groups, but what the trade union folks found was that the inability of the environmental community to

understand how to even talk to the trade unionists was a really huge problem. So they stopped inviting them.

People from the environmental movement act like people don't understand that there's something wrong when their home is flooded. They do understand – what they're trying to figure out is a credible plan out of this that doesn't mean we're the first ones sacrificed, because that is the experience of what's been happening.

So in the New York example, they set out to do their own internal trade union-on-trade union education process over a three-year period where they brought in experts that weren't linked to the environmental movement, like scientists. This ultimately led to a group of unions in New York understanding that the way they could hold their standards and move into a good, cleaner economy was that they had to have the political power to shift the governor and the state House in New York to move public subsidies.

AB: The Keep It in the Ground movement has represented one of the most powerful challenges to the fossil fuel industry, halting oil, gas, and coal projects across the US. However, workers are constantly pitted against these fossil fuel opponents. Do you think it's possible for the Keep It in the Ground movement to overcome this idea that stopping fossil fuel projects is in conflict with workers' interests?

JM: I'm all for keeping it in the ground. On the other hand, I have yet to see that when we succeed at stalling something, that the work is being done that helps the constituencies who need to unify and overcome it actually unify and overcome it. We're in this perpetual game of tension-growing, sides throwing barbs at each other, skirmishes and warfare breaking out.

Part of a way to inoculate with pipeline and construction workers is not just have rhetoric saying there will be a lot of good new jobs. What's a harm-neutral, shovel-ready infrastructure project that needs to be done, that would encompass the same number of jobs that are being proposed by the fossil fuel industry, in every debate that we have? And some people say things like, "It's not our job to figure that out." Well, OK, but it is our job to figure it out. Because we're losing.

AB: You've noted the success of the youth movement through school strikes. What other strategies should the climate movement be taking from the labour movement?

JM: Most of what the environmental movement has been doing

most of my lifetime, calling it grassroots organizing, is focusing on people who largely already agree with you and trying to get them out in larger numbers. The other choice means helping new people who are not engaged in the movement at all learn and process, through a political education program, who is to blame for the problems in their lives. In every union campaign, I have a universe of people who have no shared political understanding of the world. If we're doing our job right, the worker is going to go through a very profound change.

It's the spade work that has to be done to till the field to grow more people who understand the crisis. That is the biggest failure of the broader environmental movement. We're relying on the people that already agree with us and trying to get them out in the streets. We can't get there with these numbers.

AB: What spaces right now give you the greatest hope, especially looking forward into this election?

JM: The hopeful part is that when we're not having a fight between entrenched interests at the national level, I think most people actually care a lot about the climate crisis. They also care a hell of a lot about what kind of an economy we're going to have and if it's going to enable their family to survive.

I think a younger generation is understanding at a much more fundamental level the deeply integrated nature of all these crises. The power that it's going to take to win the Green New Deal is the same power it's going to take to win Medicare for All is the same power it's going to take to create new jobs. We have to build a movement that has enough power to win on any one of these issues that matter to us. Because right now, we are not winning on any of them. •

Alleen Brown is New York-based reporter, focused on environmental justice issues. She tweets at @AlleenBrown. Jane McAlevey is an organizer, negotiator, writer and scholar. She is the author of No Shortcuts, Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age (Oxford 2016), Raising Expectations and Raising Hell (Verso 2012) and A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy (HarperCollins, 2020). She blogs at janemcalevey.com. This article was originally published on March 9, 2020, at theintercept.com/2020/03/09/climate-labor-movements-unions-green-new-deal/.

Part IV.

SOCIAL CRISES

GLOBAL CAPITALISM, GLOBAL PANDEMIC, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIALISM

Stephen Maher and Rafael Khachaturian

We are now in the grip of one of the worst economic crises in the history of modern capitalism. As the coronavirus pandemic forces people to stay home and businesses to remain shuttered, the St. Louis Federal Reserve has projected 30% of the workforce will become unemployed, significantly surpassing the level during the Great Depression. Meanwhile, Goldman Sachs has forecasted a massive 24% drop in GDP – more than twice as large as the previous postwar record.

In seeking to manage this unfolding catastrophe, the American state has once again taken radical steps to save the system. The Federal Reserve has not only pumped liquidity into the financial sector, but has also expanded its purview to buying “unlimited” corporate debt. Thus the \$2-trillion “stimulus” bill that passed Congress, the largest in US history, is only one part of the picture. The true center of crisis management lies in agencies that have long been shielded from democratic oversight.

These events have rocked the shaky foundations on which the previous crisis was resolved, and further eroded the legitimacy of neoliberalism. Decades of austerity politics driven by the logic of “There Is No Alternative” have left the state scandalously ill-equipped to address the pandemic. As the death count continues to rise, increasingly drastic measures such as “reopening” the economy are considered – exposing the working class to mortal danger for the benefit of restoring capital accumulation.

Though the bailout of the banks after 2008 stabilized financial markets, it also led to widespread popular anger that drew neoliberal policies into question in a new way. The project of globalization pursued by the state since World War II, from which capital continued to benefit handsomely, was no longer “common sense.”

The American state had succeeded in temporarily containing the crisis, but at the expense of the legitimacy of neoliberalism – which only further crumbled amidst the austerity that followed.

This also discredited both political parties, which were both complicit in decades of neoliberal restructuring. It created space for Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump to make the case for alternative hegemonic projects, which, at least on the surface, were not at all neoliberal: “America First” nationalism, on the one hand, “democratic socialism,” on the other. With the 2016 election of Donald Trump, as well as the growth of the democratic socialist insurgency, the political crisis reverberated from the political parties throughout the state as a whole.

That the current crisis has emerged on Donald Trump’s watch opens the possibility that he will use it to further shift politics to the right. The main alternative to this is a beleaguered neoliberal establishment, which has itself supported increasingly authoritarian means to stabilize capitalism. Yet the crisis has also created an opening for the left, as the claim that expansive state policies to support social welfare are unfeasible collapses in the face of the emergency measures enacted in recent weeks. It is up to us to build on this, making the case for a fundamentally different kind of society.

Two Roads Out of the Crisis?

The crisis quite obviously points to the inadequacy of the welfare state in the US, as well as the social inequalities capitalism systematically generates. However, the fears and anxieties produced by this crisis do not automatically lead to socialist political conclusions – in fact, they could further empower the right.

Unlike in the 1930s, the global integration of capitalism today makes it hard to imagine the far right offering a coherent alternative to neoliberalism, even as it rails against “globalism.” Indeed, Trump has thus far been unwilling to challenge capital to the extent that would be necessary to truly break with globalization. There is no better proof of this than the so-called “new NAFTA,” or the USMCA. Before the ink was even dry on the deal, GM announced plant closures across North America, along with new investments in Mexico.

Similarly, though much rancor has been raised about Trump’s

tariffs, these have served not as a means for breaking with globalization, but rather deepening it by forcing the Chinese state to further liberalize. None of this has brought manufacturing jobs back to the Rust Belt, as was the dominant theme of his campaign.

Yet key centers of power within the American state have already long been insulated from democratic oversight. In this respect, as well, Trump has offered little more than a rebranded neoliberalism. Indeed, his management of the current crisis so far has not substantially differed from the past: empowering the Fed and Treasury to act as global firefighters, largely free from Congressional scrutiny.

As the economy has come to a screeching halt, the Fed has pumped liquidity into the financial system on a scale comparable to what was done after 2008. It also expanded its role to purchasing “unlimited” corporate debt, as well as financing equity purchases by the Treasury Department. These are to be undertaken and administered by BlackRock – a major private equity firm.

All this is par for the course under neoliberalism. The European Central Bank has undertaken similar purchases of corporate bonds since 2016, as part of beefing up its own crisis-fighting capacities. Such measures are intended by state officials to forestall broad economic collapse. The state will in no way seek to exercise control over the management or structure of companies in which it takes an ownership stake. This was made especially clear by Trump’s hesitancy even to exercise his powers under the Defense Production Act to compel companies to produce ventilators.

Nor is contracting BlackRock to manage financial commodities and transactions much different from insisting that manufacturing companies produce needed medical supplies. In both cases, the state is relying on firms with the capacities and expertise to accomplish its objectives. It was for this reason, as well, that the Fed collaborated closely with J.P. Morgan in resolving the 2008 crisis. And moreover, government bonds are already sold by private dealers, who receive a healthy commission for their trouble.

Although more likely to respect the rule of law, it is unclear how Joe Biden’s strategy for managing the crisis could differ substantially from Trump’s, down to a state-led recovery through an infrastructure initiative. He may also seek to secure some additional benefits for workers, albeit made with the same calculation

of “reopening America for business” by compelling them to return to their jobs sooner rather than later.

No matter which party is in power, the main task the state faces in restarting accumulation is getting people back to work. In addition to the inability to open businesses due to the need for self-quarantine is the collapse in demand as unemployment reaches record levels. This raises the specter of a deflationary spiral, such as that which characterized the Great Depression: falling demand leading to cuts to prices and employment, in turn resulting in further reduction of demand and further layoffs. Deflation would also increase the real value of debts – further compressing working class purchasing power.

A further danger, therefore, is that even once people are able to return to work, the economy would reach “equilibrium” despite massive unemployment. Avoiding this will require a massive state-led project, such as an infrastructure initiative or a Green New Deal. There is today plenty of space for such a program. Yet the massive deficits that will result from declining growth and stimulus spending, on top of the Trump tax cuts, will surely generate pressure for harsh austerity policies – which would only make things worse.

Nevertheless, if enacted, any state-led recovery would likely provide ample opportunities for investment, offering public-private partnerships and privatized infrastructure. Particularly in turbulent times, infrastructure is a highly desirable asset class – guaranteeing a stable and crisis-proof revenue stream. The risk is that, with Trump in office, this could create a broader base for his far-right politics – bringing together parts of manufacturing, the extractive sector, finance, and the building trades.

What this illustrates above all is the extent to which it was the bankruptcy of neoliberalism – and its crisis of legitimacy – that has created the conditions for Trumpism. Its inability to offer anything other than the same precarity that has resulted from four decades of these policies makes it unlikely to reestablish broad popular support. From this void, far-right nationalism and xenophobia offer an alternative source of legitimacy, thriving on the very resentment created by neoliberalism in order to perpetuate it in other key respects.

For a Left Break with Neoliberalism

Even if neoliberalism is preferable to its reactionary cousin, addressing this crisis will require policymakers to reach beyond the traditional neoliberal toolkit. Given the scale of the restructuring that is likely to occur, it is plausible that what emerges from the crisis might no longer be what we have known as neoliberal capitalism. But addressing the social and political malaise, which the pandemic has exposed and intensified, demands that we envision a third, more radical possibility: a democratic socialist road out of the crisis.

We are in an unprecedented situation. The ways the left has historically won concessions from the capitalist state – mass mobilizations and social movements – have been drastically limited by the lockdown of public space and practices of social distancing. A situation where mass gatherings are prevented tilts the balance of power even more toward the elite networks concentrated in the exclusive corridors of the state. The \$2-trillion “stimulus” bill, bailing out large corporations while providing little public relief, is evidence of that.

Nevertheless, just weeks into the crisis, we have already seen encouraging working-class mobilization – as for instance, the strikes at Whole Foods, General Electric, Instacart, and Amazon. Beyond the doctors, nurses, and healthcare professionals on the front lines, the pandemic has exposed how the same workers that are now suddenly recognized as “essential” to the system – sanitation, mass transit, agricultural, food service, and energy sector workers, among others – are treated as expendable in “normal” times.

We have also seen expressions of solidarity in the form of mutual aid organizing. However, while necessary, mutual aid, strikes, and protests are not enough. Similarly, the pandemic has only made more urgent the mounting calls for Medicare for All, as well as for expanding other desperately needed services. But we must go further. We need a broader strategy for transforming the bases of political and economic power. Rather than merely saving capitalism, we must wage a struggle to democratize both the state and the economy.

Sustaining even moderate social democratic reforms amidst the pressures of a global capitalism, and inevitable counterat-



Massachusetts senator Ed Markey at a rally for the Green New Deal. Victoria Pickering, 2019.

tacks both from corporations and within the state itself, requires a radical confrontation with the capitalist class. This must include placing limits on the ability for corporations to move investment around the world through capital controls. And we should demand not merely that this capital stay “at home,” but that it be put to meaningful social use – such as financing a Green New Deal.

In turn, an ambitious program like the Green New Deal would have little chance of succeeding without mobilizing workers. Plant closures, as capital moves investment to low-wage zones, provides an opportunity to organize workers and communities to take control of our productive capacities. At the same time, converting plants to produce socially necessary goods – such as medical supplies or technologies to address the climate crisis – also requires state investment and support. To address these urgent social needs, we must connect the democratization of production to the struggle to transform the state.

The democratic socialist project bears no resemblance to Trump’s efforts to manage the crisis. This is true despite the fact that he has increased government involvement in the “private sector,” and has even suggested taking up ownership stakes in some large firms. Similarly, Trump and the GOP have supported increasing some social protections for workers. But crucially, these

are not isolated measures. Rather, they are part of the broader project of building far-right hegemony as the legitimacy of neoliberalism evaporates.

Democratic socialists should not seek merely to acquire ownership of capitalist assets so as to restore capital accumulation and support class power through a crisis. On the contrary, the goal is to establish and deepen democratic control over both the state and the economy. Rather than bailing out the banks or large corporations, these should be nationalized and converted to produce the goods that are necessary for addressing the public health crisis – to say nothing of the ecological emergency.

Nationalizing firms without democratizing the state is simply to place them under the control of a capitalist state, which reproduces the structural power of capital – especially as it was remade during the neoliberal decades to protect markets from democratic control. This same insulation of the state from popular pressures, aided by new linkages with the financial system and corporations, is what now creates a window of opportunity for Trump. Nor would this change the undemocratic nature of capitalist corporations.

Instead of only enlarging the “public sector” administered by the capitalist state, we should fight to fundamentally transform it. Above all, this is what sharply differentiates democratic socialism from traditional social democracy. Social democrats have pursued a politics of class compromise that aims to expand social programs for workers – without democratizing state administration, or challenging capitalist social relations.

Far from expanding the public sector being sufficient, we need to mobilize state workers *against* capitalist state administrators – much as teachers have begun to do in recent years. These struggles should aim to create a different and more meaningful relationship between these workers and their “public sector” jobs, as well as a more organic connection with the communities they serve. Such a rebellion against the “public sector” as it is currently constituted, supported by extra-parliamentary movements and forces, is central to the transformation of the state.

Class, Party, and State Transformation

Despite the scale of the crisis, it is unrealistic to expect a spontaneous uprising to overthrow capitalism. Indeed, as the argument

here suggests, there is nothing automatic about coming to socialist conclusions about the systemic failure of capitalism – particularly in a climate of fear and insecurity, and in which the far-right is in power. Nor is capitalism going to simply collapse on its own. Even as the choice between socialism and barbarism seems starker than ever, there is no shortcut to doing the hard work of organizing a socialist party.

A socialist party remains the essential link between working class formation and the transformation of the state. Encouragingly, a new generation of activists in the Democratic Socialists of America has undertaken in earnest the search for the kind of organization that could give political expression to the contemporary working class. However, the US electoral system makes the emergence of a viable third party incredibly difficult. For this reason, in the context of the delegitimation of both major parties, the new “democratic socialist” movement has emerged from *within* the Democratic Party while seeking to break with it over the longer-term.

A socialist party remains the essential link between working class formation and the transformation of the state.

The achievements of the Bernie Sanders campaign, which has been a major driving force of this movement, have been remarkable. Though he likely will not win the Democratic nomination, Sanders has mobilized people across the country in support of an ambitious “political revolution,” revealing widespread public support for universal healthcare, green infrastructure, and free college education. Yet one of the clearest lessons of the campaign is that the base for left politics is still far from what is necessary to actually enact a radical break with neoliberalism – let alone a socialist transition.

Though it makes sense to continue using the Democratic Party ballot line to build the electoral left, simply winning elections should by no means be our primary focus. Rather, we should see running for elections and building a base for socialist politics as mutually reinforcing. Electoral campaigns should be pursued to

the extent that they help build links between political officeholders, trade unions, social movements, and working-class communities. Similarly, democratic socialists in office should draw strength from, and empower, social movements, rank and file struggles, and community organizations.

Pursuing these in tandem is the core of a strategy to lay the groundwork for a future socialist party. Yet such a “dirty break” from the Democratic Party depends upon our ability to develop independent working-class political capacities. Rather than aiming to “transform” the Democratic Party by simply becoming a more important part of its coalition, we must consciously lay the foundations for an alternative. Though this goal is still years away, it is imperative that we take steps toward realizing it in the here and now, rather than postponing it into the indefinite future.

Just as the current crisis has brought opportunities, so too has it intensified the dangers we face. With the legitimacy of neoliberalism in tatters and unable to resolve these mounting crises, the far-right threatens to consolidate its influence through a cross-class alliance. Yet this has also created an opening for a renewed democratic socialist left to craft its own hegemonic and cross-class project. Only by envisioning a society beyond capitalism, and connecting much needed short-term victories to an ambitious project of social transformation, can we turn this crisis from a catastrophe into an opportunity. •

This article was originally published on April 7, 2020, by New Politics and is online at newpol.org/global-capitalism-global-pandemic-and-the-struggle-for-socialism/.



Protesters in Oakland. Peg Hunter, 2020.

RACISM, COVID-19, AND THE FIGHT FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Marty Hart-Lansberg

While the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests sweeping the United States were triggered by recent police murders of unarmed African Americans, they are also helping to encourage popular recognition that racism has a long history of punishing consequences for black people that extend beyond policing. Among these are the enormous disparities between black and white well-being and security. This post seeks to draw attention to some of these disparities by highlighting black-white trends in unemployment, wages, income, wealth, and security.

A common refrain during this pandemic is “We are all in this together.” Although this is true in the sense that almost all of us find our lives transformed for the worst because of COVID-19, it is also not true in some very important ways. For example, African Americans are disproportionately dying from the virus. They account for 22.4 per cent of all COVID-19 deaths despite making up only 12.5 per cent of the population.

One reason is that African Americans also disproportionately suffer from serious pre-existing health conditions, a lack of health insurance, and inadequate housing, all of which increase their vulnerability to the virus. Another reason is that black workers are far more likely than white workers to work in “front-line” jobs, especially low-wage ones, forcing them to risk their health and that of their families. While black workers comprise 11.9 per cent of the labor force, they make up 17 per cent of all front-line workers. They represent an even higher percentage in some key front-line industries: 26 per cent of public transit workers; 19.3 per cent of childcare and social service workers; and 18.2 per cent of trucking, warehouse, and postal service workers.

Unemployment

African Americans have also disproportionately lost jobs during this pandemic. The ratio of black employment to adult population fell from 59.4 per cent before the start of the pandemic to a record low of 48.8 per cent in April. Not surprisingly, recent surveys find, as the *Washington Post* reports, that:

“More than 1 in 5 black families now report they often or sometimes do not have enough food – more than three times the rate for white families. Black families are also almost four times as likely as whites to report they missed a mortgage payment during the crisis – numbers that do not bode well for the already low black homeownership rate.”

This pandemic has hit African Americans especially hard precisely because they were forced to confront it from a position of economic and social vulnerability, as the following trends help to demonstrate

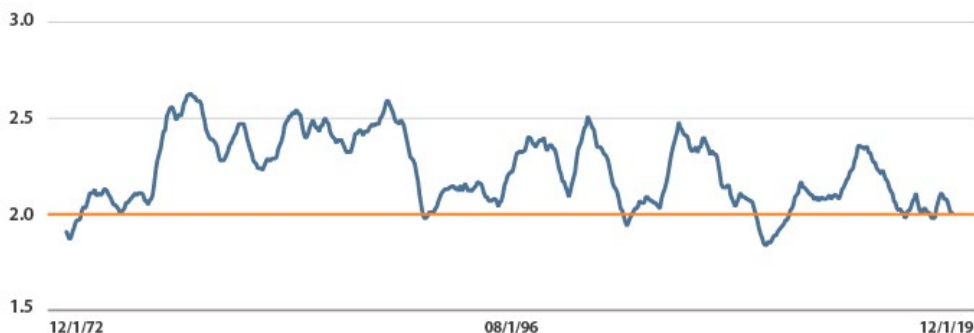
The Bureau of Labor Statistics began collecting separate data on African American unemployment in January 1972. Since then, as the chart below shows, the African American unemployment rate has largely stayed at or above twice the white unemployment rate.

As Olugbenga Ajilore explains:

“Between strides in civil rights legislation, desegrega-

The Black unemployment rate is consistently twice the white unemployment rate

12-month moving average of the black-white unemployment ratio, 1972–2019



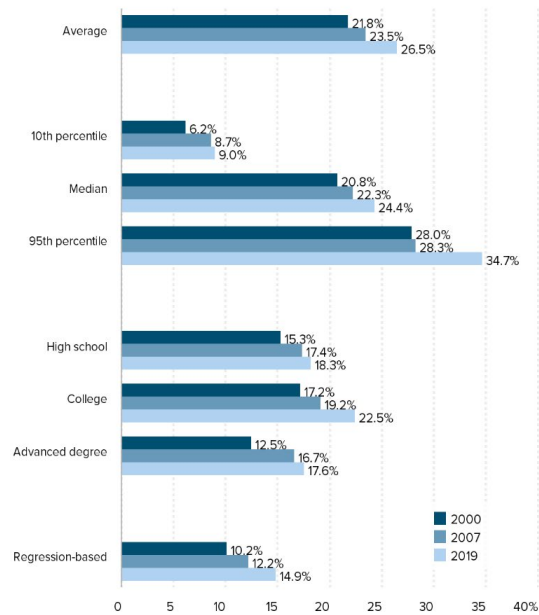
Notes: The orange line represents the Black rate being double the white rate. Monthly numbers are seasonally adjusted. The 12-month moving average takes the average of the previous 12 months in order to smooth out the graph.

Sources: Federal Reserve Economic Data, "Unemployment Rate: Black or African American," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, available at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNS14000006#0> (last accessed February 2020).



Black–white wage gaps widen across multiple measures

Black–white wages gaps at different points in the wage distribution, by education, and regression-based, 2000, 2007, and 2019



Notes: Sample based on all workers ages 16 and older. The xth-percentile wage is the wage at which x% of wage earners earn less and (100-x)% earn more. Educational attainment is based on mutually exclusive categories: e.g., high school is high school only, etc. Similar results are found for those with less than high school or some college. The regression-adjusted black–white wage gap controls for education, age, gender, and region.

Source: Author’s analysis of EPI Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0 (2020), <https://microdata.epi.org>.

Economic Policy Institute

tion of government, and increases in educational attainment, employment gaps should have narrowed by now, if not completely closed. Yet as [the figure above] shows, this has not been the case.”

Wages

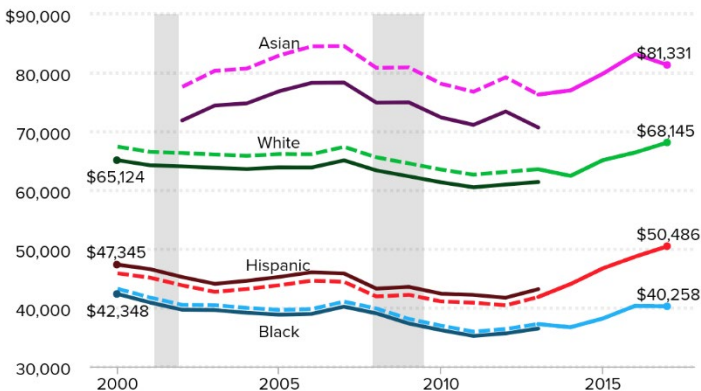
The “Black-white wage gap” chart below from an *Economic Policy Institute* study shows the black-white wage gap for workers in different earning percentiles, by education level, and regression-adjusted (to control for age, gender, education, and regional differences). As we can see, the wage gap has grown over time regardless of mea-

sure. Elise Gould summarizes some important take-aways from this study:

“The black-white wage gap is smallest at the bottom of the wage distribution, where the minimum wage serves as a wage floor. The largest black-white wage gap, as well as the one with the most growth since the Great Recession, is found at the top of the wage distribution, explained in part by the pulling away of top earners generally, as well as continued occupational segregation, the disproportionate likelihood for white workers to occupy positions in the highest-wage professions.

“It’s clear from the figure that education is not a panacea for closing these wage gaps. Again, this should not be shocking, as increased equality of educational access – as laudable a goal as it is – has been shown to have only small effects on class-based wage inequality, and racial wealth gaps have been almost entirely unmoved by a narrowing of the black-white college attainment gap ... And after controlling for age, gender, education, and region, black workers are paid 14.9% less than white workers.”

Real median household income, by race and ethnicity, 2000–2017



Note: CPS ASEC changed its methodology in 2013, hence the break in the series. Solid lines are actual CPS ASEC data; dashed lines denote historical values imputed by applying the new methodology to past income trends. White refers to non-Hispanic whites, black refers to blacks alone, Asian refers to Asians alone, and Hispanic refers to Hispanics of any race. Comparable data are not available prior to 2002 for Asians. Shaded areas denote recessions.

Source: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement Historical

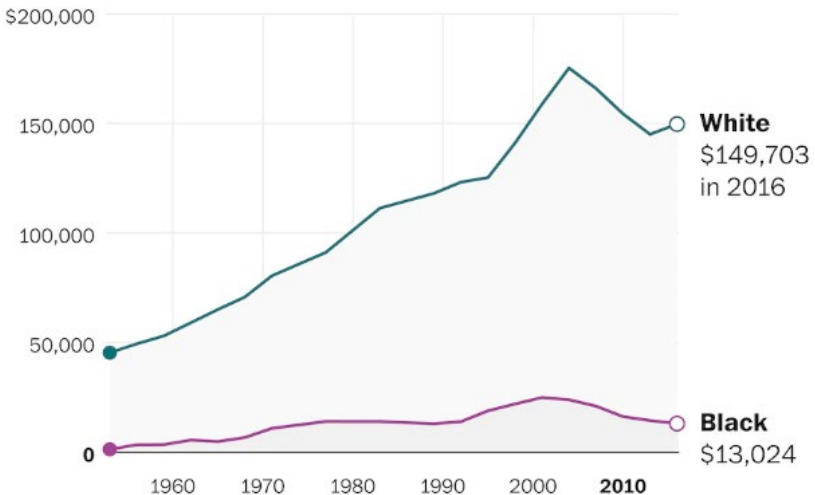
Income

The next chart below shows that while median household income has generally stagnated for all races/ethnicities over the period 2000 to 2017, only blacks have suffered an actual decline. The median income for black households actually fell from \$42,348 to \$40,258 over this period. As a consequence, the black-white income gap has grown. The median black household in 2017 earned just 59 cents for every dollar of income earned by the white median household, down from 65 cents in 2000.

Moreover, as Valerie Wilson, points out, “Based on [Economic Policy Institute] imputed historical income values, 10 years after the start of the Great Recession in 2007, only African American and Asian households have not recovered their pre-recession median income.” Median household income for African American households fell 1.9 per cent, or \$781, over the period 2007 to 2017. While

White wealth surges; black wealth stagnates

Median household wealth, adjusted for inflation



Source: Historical Survey of Consumer Finances via Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and University of Bonn economists Moritz Kuhn, Moritz Schularick and Ulrike I. Steins
THE WASHINGTON POST

the decline was greater for Asian households (3.8 per cent), they continued to have the highest median income.

Wealth

The wealth gap between black and white households also remains large. In 1968, median black household wealth was \$6,674 compared with median white household wealth of \$70,768. In 2016, as the chart below shows, it was \$13,024 compared with \$149,703. As the *Washington Post* summarizes:

“The historical data reveal that no progress has been made in reducing income and wealth inequalities between black and white households over the past 70 years,’ wrote economists Moritz Kuhn, Moritz Schularick and Ulrike I. Steins in their analysis of US incomes and wealth since World War II.

“As of 2016, the most recent year for which data is available, you would have to combine the net worth of 11.5 black households to get the net worth of a typical white US household.”

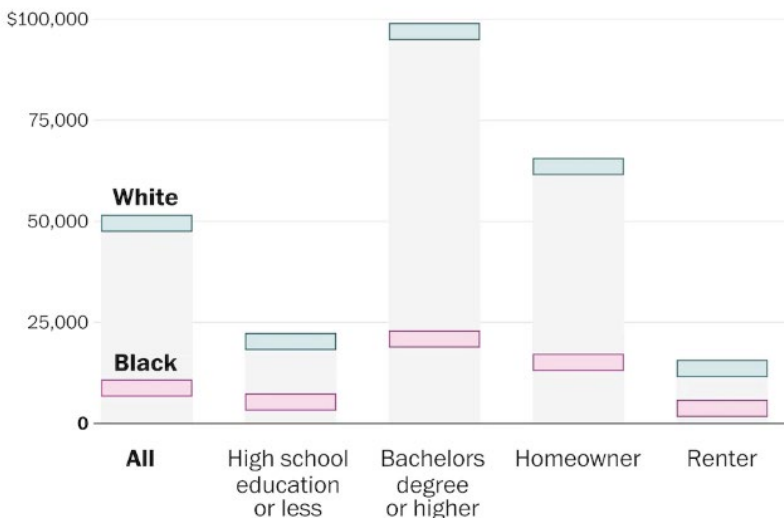
The self-reinforcing nature of racial discrimination is well illustrated in the next chart. It shows the median household wealth by education level as defined by the education level of the head of household.

As we see, black median household wealth is below white median household wealth at every education level, with the gap growing with the level of education. In fact, the median black household headed by someone with an advanced degree has less wealth than the median white household headed by someone with only a high school diploma. The primary reason for this is that wealth is passed on from generation to generation, and the history of racism has made it difficult for black families to accumulate wealth, much less pass it on to future generations.

Security

The dollar value of household ownership of liquid assets is one measure of economic security. The greater the value, the easier it is for a household to weather difficult times, not to mention unexpected crises, such as today’s pandemic. And as one might expect in light of the above income and wealth trends, black households have far less

Average cash on hand, 2016



Note: Includes checking and savings accounts, cash, prepaid cards and directly held stocks, bonds and mutual funds.

Source: Federal Reserve via Elise Gould and Valerie Wilson of the Economic Policy Institute
THE WASHINGTON POST

security than do white households.

As we can see in the following chart, the median black household held only \$8,762 in liquid assets (defined as the sum of all cash, checking and savings accounts, and directly held stocks, bonds, and mutual funds). In comparison, the median white household held \$49,529 in liquid assets. And the black-white gap is dramatically larger for households headed by someone with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Hopeful Possibilities

The fight against police violence against African Americans, now being advanced in the streets, will eventually have to be expanded and the struggle for racial justice joined to a struggle for economic justice. Ending the disparities highlighted above will require nothing less than a transformational change in the organization and

workings of our economy.

One hopeful sign is the widespread popular support for, and growing participation in, the Black Lives Matter-led movement that is challenging not only racist policing but the idea of policing itself and is demanding that the country acknowledge and confront its racist past. Perhaps the ways in which our current economic system has allowed corporations to so quickly shift the dangers and costs of the pandemic onto working people, following years of steady decline in majority working and living conditions, is helping whites better understand the destructive consequences of racism and encouraging this political awakening.

If so, perhaps we have arrived at a moment when it will be possible to build a multi-racial working class-led movement for structural change that is rooted in and guided by a commitment to achieving economic justice for all people of color. One can only hope that is true for all our sakes. •

Martin Hart-Landsberg is Professor Emeritus of Economics at Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon; and Adjunct Researcher at the Institute for Social Sciences, Gyeongsang National University, South Korea. His areas of teaching and research include political economy, economic development, international economics, and the political economy of East Asia. This article was first published on June 20, 2020, at [economic-front.wordpress.com/2020/06/20/racism-covid-19-and-the-fight-for-economic-justice/](https://front.wordpress.com/2020/06/20/racism-covid-19-and-the-fight-for-economic-justice/).

THE CALIFORNIA DISASTER

What is the Link Between Wildfires and the Coronavirus?

Christoph Hermann



Wildfires near the municipal airport at Ukiah, California. Bob Dass, 2018.

I live in the San Francisco-Bay Area outside of Berkeley. Following the COVID-19 outbreak we went into shelter-in-place in March and officially never left after a second wave in early summer perpetuated school closures and other preventive measures. Following another dry winter and an unprecedented heatwave, Northern California is currently experiencing a series of massive wildfires, much earlier and widespread than in ‘normal’ years. As a result, the Bay Area for weeks struggled with bad air quality and occasionally with an apocalyptic orange-gleaming sky.

These are very challenging times. But the simultaneous occurrence of a healthcare and an environmental crisis, or more precisely, the inability to solve them, is not a coincidence. What they both have in common is the dependence on a technological fix for our social and

environmental problems. Or, to put it differently, the unwillingness to question the rationality of our economic system and alter associated ways of living. The dependence on a technological fix, in turn, follows from the priority of maximizing profits rather than satisfying human needs.

San Francisco and the Bay Area are known for the combination of social progressivism and economic liberalism, providing a fertile ground for innovation. It is not by accident that the region, which includes Silicon Valley, is home to some of the most valued tech-companies, including Google, Facebook, and Zoom, along with some less known but nevertheless highly profitable biotech firms. Berkeley streets are full of electric cars, and every other house displays a black-lives-matter sign, including the Berkeley Hills, where very few African-Americans actually live. Residents are open and mindful, and embrace racial and gender diversity. In many regards, Berkeley and the Bay Area are the antithesis to Donald Trump's America.

Opening Up Too Early

Therefore, it is all the more surprising that the region is unable to cope with the COVID-19 epidemic. True, technology helped to limit the spread of the disease, as tech workers and others who mainly work with a computer worked from home. But manual labourers, along with essential workers, did not enjoy this 'luxury' and went out in violation of shelter-in-place orders. Many had no choice. They needed the money to buy groceries and pay rent. As a result, infection rates remained high in spite of the early shutdown. And with the shutdown stretching over several weeks, business owners and others became increasingly impatient, threatening public health officials and disregarding public health orders. When the (democratic) governor started to 'open-up' the economy in June, infection rates rapidly increased, surpassing previous records from early April. The governor responded with another shutdown, but one that focused on the closure of schools and other public institutions, while leaving most businesses open.

The failure to cope with the epidemic is symptomatic for the US healthcare system. The private nature of much of US healthcare means there is little interest in preventive care. Customers might have changed the insurance well before any investments in preventive care starts to pay off. At the same time, the perpetuation of preventable diseases makes sure that profit-oriented healthcare providers have no

shortage of customers. A substantial gap in (private) health insurance coverage and hefty co-payments means that Americans see a doctor less frequently than Europeans or Canadians, but if they do, they receive MRIs, CTs, and PET scans more often.

The importance of technology in the US healthcare system is also evident in the widespread use of online-diagnosis, as well as the frequent prescription of drugs rather than more labour-intensive therapies. The focus on a technology-based rather than a human-centered medical approach extends to the US government. Instead of investing in public health, including the promotion of workplace health and safety, the US government spends millions of dollars in support of the pharma industry and the development of new drugs. Given the capital-intensive nature of US healthcare, it should not come as a surprise that a vaccine is the only solution for the coronavirus-crisis, even if more than two-hundred-thousand Americans have lost their lives before the vaccine is ready.

Parallels Between COVID-19 and the Environment: Technology and the Profit Motive

Because of global warming, California has experienced an extended drought in the last decade, interrupted by a few ‘wet’ winters. At the same time, increasing temperatures have meant that the fire season has been prolonged far into fall. The result is more and increasingly large wildfires. As with the coronavirus, the state early on recognized the problem and in the US context is seen as forerunner when it comes to the adoption of pro-environmental norms and incentives, such as fuel emission standards and tax rebates for electric cars.

However, much of California is still characterized by a wasteful use of resources, including a massive network of freeways that cuts through natural and urban spaces, the dominance of detached single homes, some very spacious, and the displacement of low-income households. All of this results in ever-longer commutes, shopping malls, a highly industrialized and, hence, energy-intensive agriculture, and the lack of any meaningful public transport and other public alternatives to private consumption. In short, here, too, efforts are focused on the development of new technologies that allow us to continue our lifestyle, or more precisely, the lifestyle of middle- and upper-class households, while preserving the environment.

Perhaps the best example for this approach is Tesla: under the

leadership of CEO Elon Musk, the company sells electric cars and solar panels as an alleged solution to the climate crisis. However, in order to take advantage of Tesla's environmental-friendly technology, customers need a house to install solar panels and an outlet to plug their electric cars in, which in the Bay Area can easily cost one million dollars. The fact that everyone wants to own a house, rather than to live in a communal and sustainable housing complex with shared spaces, is part of the problem, not the solution.

As in the case of the coronavirus, the solution is social, not technological. Or, in other words, the solution demands a radical change in our mode of living, and this, in turn, requires a profound transformation of our system of production and consumption. It is not by accident that the same Musk who promotes electric cars and solar panels resisted the orders of the local public health authority and threatened to relocate Bay Area production to Texas if his factory would not be exempted from the coronavirus shutdown.

The heart of the problem is an economy whose main objective is the maximization of profits rather than the satisfaction of needs. Needs are only relevant if they can be satisfied in a profitable manner. In the same way, environmental concerns are only addressed in a way that does not hurt profits. Take the example of transport: the need for transport can be solved collectively, through the provision of public transport; or it can be satisfied individually, through the sale of automobiles. Public transport is clearly better for the environment. The fact that thousands, if not millions, of people use the same infrastructure, and the infrastructure lasts for several decades, means that the number of resources (space, materials, energy, waste, etc.) consumed per person-transport-mileage is much smaller than the resources used by cars, even if the cars are electronically powered. However, the prospect of selling close to a million cars per year – many households in California have two or more cars – is much more profitable than the provision of public transport. It is not by accident that investors are eager to buy Tesla shares (which reached a record high during the pandemic) and invest in self-driving technology, while public transport systems such as Bay Area Rapid Transport are crumbling.

Alternatives to the Profit Motive

In the same way, the development of a vaccine is much more profitable than investments in preventive health practices, including mea-

sures that reduce stress, anxiety, and physical exhaustion, caused by job insecurity and exploitative workplace relations. Imagine if we took the coronavirus-crisis as an opportunity to halt the production-consumption cycle and focus on the satisfaction of essential needs, instead of forcing people to work from home while caring for their children, or even worse, to go out and risk their lives for their job – including the workers who were required to resume work in the Tesla factory. Of course, this would require sufficient support of all those who have no savings that they can rely on, which, again, requires a meaningful distribution from the rich to the poor. The potential would certainly exist, as the Bay Area is home to one of the highest proportion of billionaires per square foot in the world. Even more so, the few weeks that people actually stayed at home instead of commuting to work and spending their weekends in shopping malls, showed that a focus on essential activities not only stops the spread of the virus but also benefits the environment.

Imagine even further an economic and social system that focuses on the satisfaction of needs rather the maximization of profits. Following the expansion of public transport, streets and parking lots could be turned into much-needed housing and green spaces; housing and cities could be designed to minimize the use of energy and water and to reduce the need for traffic; food would be local, fresh, and healthy, and consumption limited to essential goods and services, leaving ample free time to pursue personal interests; healthcare would no longer be a business and focus on preventing rather than curing diseases, while necessary treatments would be available to everybody who needs them; admission to college would also be free, and students would study to learn rather than to obtain a degree that promises a high income. Most importantly, people with lots of money would no longer receive preferential treatment, and their needs would count the same as those of regular citizens.

As we know, the reality looks staggeringly different. But as the accelerating crisis shows, the current system is incapable of solving our social and environmental problems – and providing a ‘good life’ for everyone. •

This article was originally published on September 23, 2020, at socialist-project.ca/2020/09/california-disaster-link-between-wildfires-and-coronavirus/.

Smoke billowing over San Francisco
Christopher Michel, 2020.



POLITICAL OPENINGS

Class Struggle During and After the Pandemic

Sam Gindin



Poster in St. Louis.
Paul Sableman, 2020.

For some on the left, the economic breakthrough brought on by the pandemic was the general consensus, not least among economists, for an astonishing increase in fiscal spending. Relative to the economy's size, the stimulus introduced so far in the US is already *double* (in Canada triple) what it was during the 2008-09 crisis, with more to come. And the stimulus in that earlier crisis was the largest since WWII, leading the OECD to declare that the earlier intervention “now seems like a small-scale rehearsal for the [present] disruptions to our socioeconomic system.”

The insistence by the adherents to Keynesianism and Modern Monetary Theory that there is generally more room for increases in public spending than governments let on, especially during deep crises, is valid. Their conclusion that something fundamental and perhaps permanent has changed in terms of looser spending constraints is seductive – it would indeed make things easier if all that was needed was to elect the right people and have them print money to meet popular priorities. But this obscures the most basic political questions of class and power under capitalism.

Spending Our Way to the Good Society?

Though central banks can lever the supply of money, this still depends on reverberations throughout the private sector. Financial institutions must want to lend, and so, generate an increase in the effective money supply. Corporations must want to borrow and invest. The alternative of the state itself doing the spending, and thereby replacing private institutions in choosing and carrying out priorities, directly challenges capitalism's foundations – taking us a good deal beyond simply gearing up the money presses.

Moreover, the apparent contradiction between earlier pressures to restrain fiscal expenditures and the current profligacy actually includes an underlying *consistency*: reproducing the conditions for capitalist success. The shift to the high levels of government spending didn't signal a permanent new paradigm for running a capitalist economy. It wasn't the result of organized pressure from below or a sudden moral or conceptual conversion at the top. Rather, it was primarily imposed by the nature of the crisis and the conservative goal of returning to the earlier trajectory.

There is in a sense not one 'bourgeois' economics but two: one economic theory/logic for normal times and another, with different tools and mechanisms, for times of deep crisis. The pandemic could only be overcome through temporarily keeping workers away from work, which required giving them funds to survive without employment (a contrast with 2008-9 when subsidies generally ignored 'main street'). And the business infrastructure could only be saved for a 'later' revival with more loans and handouts. It was these two factors – keeping workers at home and businesses liquid – that brought on the remarkable degree of fiscal stimulus.

At bottom, how societies determine the allocation of their la-

bour and resources – who is in charge, what the priorities are, who gets what – rests on considerations of social power and corresponding values/priorities. Transforming how this is done is conditional on developing and organizing popular support for challenging the private power of banks and corporations over our lives and with this, accepting the risks this entails. Controlling the money presses is certainly an element in this, but hardly the core challenge.

The present stimulus may indeed continue for a while. The fear of a second infection wave, the related fragility of the economy, and a concern, as well, to contain heightened social unease may be enough to sustain the stimulus through the rest of this year and perhaps the next. Moreover, the electoral costs to parties of the center-left of their past complicity in austerity teach the priority of limiting fiscal restraint as part of winning back and consolidating their former base. This may further support the unprecedented levels of fiscal spending for a period that extends into the likely Biden presidency.

But as a semblance of normality returns, so too can we expect the prevailing economic logic to again revert to orthodoxy. This will bring intense pressures to address a fiscal deficit swollen by the unusual steps taken during the extended health crisis, especially when even *more* spending will be called for to address decaying infrastructures, revealed social needs, and revived attention to the environmental crisis. The choices will by then be stark, even in the US with its privileges of being the home of the world's currency of choice.

US finance will warn of uncertainty and threaten to leave. Even if this threat is overblown, it will matter. Foreign investors will call on the US to get its house in order or see a fall in the dollar. Corporations will worry about inflation, higher interest rates to attract/retain foreign capital, and higher taxes to offset the growing debt. The dollar may, as it is now doing, fluctuate erratically. All of this, business will 'advise', will bring a reluctance to invest until the future – *their* future – is more settled. The lifespan of the current spending consensus is consequently limited (noises to this effect, though still subdued, are already surfacing).

This is not to suggest there are no options. Rather, it's to warn that the post-pandemic situation is likely to choke off the middle ground of spending the US into a happy republic. This will force a choice: will governments advance a far more radical approach in the redistribution of wealth and private economic rights/power, or will

they retreat to once again hammering working people? The center may have moved, but even if Biden and the Democrats are generally reluctant to again impose austerity on working people, it's hard to imagine that those who worked so hard to defeat the threat Sanders represented to the party establishment will, when confronted with difficult and polarized options, have the courage or will to choose the radical alternative.

This holds out a new threat. For the left, the primary lesson of Trumpism isn't that Americans are racists (though some certainly are). Rather, it's that if the government and institutions of the day don't speak to popular frustrations, explain their roots, and channel them constructively, the right will mobilize the discontent destructively. A repeat of the Democratic Party's policies of the recent past risk not only more harm to working people but also a repeat of new Trump emerging down the road – this time perhaps less clumsy and therefore even more dangerous.

A Fundamental Crisis in Capitalism?

A more radical current on the left begins its analysis of the present moment by arguing that the economy was already in deep trouble *before* the pandemic; the pandemic only aggravated that crisis (for a sophisticated defense of this position see the work of Michael Roberts). Debating this is not an academic distraction. How we assess the contradictions of our era carries differing implications for expected scenarios and strategies.

For example, if the operating assumption is that we're in a period of deglobalization, we might expect competitive pressures on the working classes to abate, with increased space for a new confidence and militancy. If capitalism is characterized as being on the verge of collapse, the central concern might be to patiently prepare for picking up the pieces. If we interpret the US economy, in particular, as a basket case, some may take this to mean that some kind of rebellion is imminent. If we anticipate a new era of inter-imperial rivalry, then an intensified nationalism might further divert workers from a class politics.

There is often, in such negative readings of capitalism's current economic arc, an unstated political hopefulness about the response of the working classes. Capitalism's problems will, such observers argue, make workers more receptive to a radical alternative. This 'pes-

simism of the economy' and 'optimism of the resistance' is, however, an unconvincing basis for assessing present openings.

Globalization may very well slow from its recent over-heated pace, but transnational companies are not going away; foreign supply chains, trade, and foreign investment are not about to be marginalized in corporate strategies; finance is not going to withdraw from its international presence. Capitalism may have been heading for a downturn before the pandemic, but a 'downturn' is not a 'crisis' – the past century has witnessed many such downturns. Recovering from the pandemic will certainly be fraught and drawn out throughout the world, but a difficult transition does not necessarily threaten the economic system as a whole.

In the US, problems in particular sectors clearly exist. But this doesn't negate US capital's continuing leadership in world-leading high-tech sectors and in the most important global business services, financial services above all. Complementing this stands the US Federal Reserve, which has, if anything, expanded its capacities and reconfirmed its role as the effective central bank of the world. Geopolitically, a Biden presidency can be expected to focus on 'unity' at home and restoring American credibility abroad, including a less rhetorical antagonism to freer trade (with the now mandatory assertion that it will be done while protecting American jobs).

As for US-China rivalry, there will certainly be on-going geopolitical tensions, even very menacing ones; the making of a globally integrated capitalism is not a 'tea party'. Yet even under Trump's confused and inconsistent policies, the extent of the integration of the two dominant global economies makes analogies to earlier imperial rivalries inapt. It is telling that for all the rhetoric and tit-for-tat to date, the trade conflicts have been primarily channelled into US pressure for China's economic liberalization in terms of opening China up to US tech and finance firms, while the main concern of China has been that the US act less erratically and more 'responsibly' as a world leader.

In any case, the impact of negative economic results on resistance is not so straightforward. A troubled economy may very well undermine rather than strengthen worker confidence and militancy. Many working-class families, exhausted from trying to cope with the crisis, may be more amenable to fixing capitalism's problems, even if it includes some further pain, than with looking to the un-

certainties of capitalism's collapse. They may, in light of recent insecurities, even be grateful for a return to a near-normal that, whatever its problems were, no longer seems all that bad.

None of this is to deny that there is a crisis in capitalism. It lies, however, on a different plane than the system's ability to make profit for its stockholders, reward executives handsomely and penetrate every corner of life and of the globe. It is rather the conditions and consequences of capitalism's *successes* in these terms – the sustained failures of capitalism to address popular needs, hopes, and fears as it commodifies nature and human activity – that defines the actual crisis as one that is not primarily economic but a matter of social *legitimacy*.

As the responses from parties and states to the rising discontent proved wanting, the crisis of legitimacy grew into a *political* crisis. Alongside popular anger with policies like free trade and austerity has come a loss of confidence and faith in state institutions ranging from social agencies to the judiciary and the police, along with disenchantment and alienation with mainstream political parties. It is on the terrain of social delegitimation and such political instability that capitalism's vulnerability lies.



US treasury secretary Steve Mnuchin speaks to the press. White House, 2020.

Strategic Dilemmas, Political Openings

The pandemic, it is now commonly noted, further highlighted capitalism's social irrationalities. This was especially so in the US with its stunted (though very expensive) health system and in Trump's crass response to the relative weight of commercial versus health concerns.

To this opening for building a radical opposition was added the environmental connection. Though largely pushed to the side during the pandemic, Covid-19 served as the canary-in-the-mine for capitalism's general unpreparedness for not only future health pandemics but also the infinitely greater environmental crisis already enveloping us. Unlike health pandemics, the environmental crisis can't be resolved through lockdowns, social distancing, and vaccines. It demands a radical restructuring of how society is organized, what we value, and how we relate to each other – issues that dwarf the already traumatic experiences with Covid-19.

How, for example, will we respond if a worsening environment forces people in the global south off their land and brings mass migration to the more developed world? Do we even have the planning capacity to deal with *internal* mass migration if floods and droughts start occurring within our own borders? Can we really expect that people would heed calls for consumption restraint when the excess consumption of the rich so clearly translates into starvation for the poor and lower-income groups? The health pandemic gave states emergency powers, but they were, in general, only moderately applied; what kind of emergency powers would environmental collapse require and how could this be balanced by democratic checks?

A third opening broaches the pandemic's potential impact on class formation. Nothing is more important than breakthroughs at this level, since creating the social power to *actually change circumstances* takes us beyond lamenting unfairness, expressing moral outrage, or sinking into a debilitating fatalism. In this regard, the combination of front-line workers facing intensified health risks, and the unique degree of public empathy for their work, has raised the prospect of a new militancy erupting within unions alongside a surge in new unionization in key sectors, each reinforcing the other.

The protests with the highest profile by far during the pandemic (and which were only partially an outcome of the pandemic) were those that erupted against police abuse and murder of Black people. The size of these protests, their energy, and widespread support from

whites pose the question of whether this might now contribute to a broader left politics, one no longer haunted and diverted by racial divisions.

Adolph Reed Jr. has long argued that the way forward lies in expanding the frame of black politics to incorporate ‘the kinds of social and economic policies that address Black people as workers, students, parents, taxpayers, citizens, people in need of decent jobs, housing, and healthcare, or concerned with foreign policy [rather than] homogenize them under a monolithic racial classification’.

The other path, and for now perhaps the more likely one, is that the excitement and confidence generated by the protests reinforce a concentration on organizing around specifically ‘black’ concerns and the further ghettoization of black politics. The focus on policing is of obvious concern to blacks: their rate of incarceration is 5- to-6 times that of whites, and their likelihood of being shot and killed by police is roughly 2.5 times that of whites.

But something more than race is going on. The incarceration rate of American whites is itself generally more than double that of other rich countries, and in absolute numbers, police shoot and kill almost twice as many non-Hispanic whites – very few of whom are bankers or business execs – than blacks (from 2017 through mid 2020, 1441 whites were killed by police and 778 blacks). There is a policing problem in the US that stinks of racism but is also a broader *class* issue and one particular to the US.

Similarly, it is understandable that black activists point to the higher poverty rates in black communities and the wealth gap between working class blacks and working-class whites. But it would be a betrayal of the spirit of social justice that pervaded the protests if its ambitions were limited to ‘raising’ the conditions of poor blacks to the levels of poor whites, be they struggling single white mothers, whites coping with opioid addiction, or white workers laid off along with their Black brothers and sisters. Limited, as well, would be calling for working-class Blacks to match the wealth of working-class whites when sitting over both are the ten per cent of households that control over 70-75 per cent of all wealth (sources vary).

The big question – the *historic* question given how impressive the June protests were – is whether a pivot will occur within this emerging movement toward creating the multi-issue black-white working-class alliances without which blacks (and whites) simply cannot win.

Strategic Demands

What kinds of demands and campaigns might then contribute to building and spreading the understandings, networks, commitments, struggles, and structures that can realize the potentials flagged by life under the pandemic? We can expect the emergence of a wide range of mobilizations, based on differing demographics, regions, constituencies, and interests. But can we also identify a short and focused set of demands – not a wish list or a comprehensive program for a socialist government, but strategic demands that go beyond particularist concerns to contribute to the construction of a *nation-wide* movement to fundamentally challenge capitalist power?

Specific demands can only emerge out of widespread discussions. The demand for universal healthcare, its crucial importance all the more revealed through the pandemic, seems an obvious, common sense one. Yet the Democratic Party and some leaders of key unions have rejected it. This signals one arena of struggle that will undoubtedly occur within the broad left itself (never mind extending it to pharmacare and dental care and ending private control over the research and manufacture of drugs and protective equipment). To that, three demands, each strategically related to the new openings posed above, might be added.

One is the demand for a *one-time emergency wealth tax*. This is an unashamedly populist demand, intended to appeal to a broad swath of the population without addressing more fundamental issues of democratic economic control. A second is *economic conversion*, an unashamedly radical demand that moves beyond the generalities of the Green New Deal and the vagueness of a ‘just transition’ to engage workers in struggles that link the maintenance of a livable planet to the democratically planned restructuring of the economy.

Thirdly we need a push for greater *unionization*. The promise here lies not only in shifting the balance of power between specific groups of workers and their employers, but also in unleashing a long-awaited union upsurge with the potential to transform a working class consisting of fragmented and demoralized workers into a coherent social agent capable of winning and sustaining social change.

One-Time Emergency Wealth Tax

In the late 1980s the distribution of household wealth in the US (net worth minus debts) was already stunningly unequal, with the

wealth of the top ten per cent of households having more than one-and-a-half times that of the combined wealth of the rest. By 2020, the top ten per cent increased their share to *double* that of all other US households. The shift was even greater for the one per cent at the top of the American pyramid: at the start of 2020, 1.6 million American families had as much wealth as the 144 million households constituting the bottom 90 per cent.

Such astonishing inequalities contradict any substantive notion of democracy. It perpetuates, through inter-generational transfer, future inequalities that are even less defensible. Rationalizing such inequality as the necessary ‘price’ of our rising standard of living has always been a feeble defense. It is especially so today, after three decades in which the top ten per cent grabbed *seventy per cent* of the total increase in US household wealth at the same time as the quality of life for most Americans stagnated or deteriorated.

During the Depression, the top tax rate in the US went from 25 per cent in 1931 to 70 per cent at the end of the 1930s. At the beginning of WWII, it was increased to 81 per cent, and in light of the war emergency and sacrifices ordinary people were called on to make, it was raised to 94 per cent and an excess profit tax was introduced. (Today, by contrast, the top rate is just 37 per cent.) In that same spirit, the current moment of crisis, with its special sensitivity to inequalities and the massive and unwarranted affluence of the rich, calls for a decisive and radical reversal in the distribution of wealth.

To get a sense of the fiscal potentials of a one-time emergency wealth tax to offset the costs of the pandemic, consider the following example. If the top one per cent were kept to their share of wealth at the end of the 1980s (one quarter of all wealth) – that is, if their wealth increased at only the rate of the total increase in wealth since 1989 – this would justify a one-time average tax on their current wealth of 23 per cent or some *\$7.5-trillion* (which might be phased in over a few years to accommodate the process of cashing in some locked-up wealth so as to pay the tax).

This would, because of the overall growth in inflation-adjusted wealth, still leave the average household in the top *one* per cent with more than triple the wealth they had in 1989 and the average wealth of someone in that top category some eighty-nine times the average wealth of those in the bottom ninety per cent. (If an emergency one-



time wealth tax of just one per cent were levied on the rest of the top ten per cent, which would generate another \$4-trillion).

To put this in perspective, the latest government estimates suggest a ‘pandemic deficit’ of some \$6-trillion (i.e., the \$4-trillion increase projected in the fiscal deficits in 2020 and 2021 over the pre-pandemic year 2019 plus an assumption of continued emergency spending while tax revenues lag). Or to use another comparison, Biden’s largest proposed budgetary item, the Green New Deal, is costed at \$7-trillion over 7 years. These are only illustrative, but they point to a significant one-time emergency wealth tax going a long way to overcoming the fiscal space lost in coping with the pandemic or for addressing essential programs.

No less important is the organizing significance of placing such an emergency tax on the public agenda. It would keep the inequalities in US capitalism in the public eye and those at the top of the pyramid on the defensive. It would also position the left regarding future debates over ‘getting the fiscal deficit in order’; if we were in the midst of exposing wealth inequalities and discussing how far to go with a new tax on wealth, elites might be in a bit of a bind arguing that the deficit is ‘unaffordable’ and there is ‘nothing to do’ but cut social programs and wages. And as argued earlier, highlighting

the class distribution of wealth shifts the understanding of a ‘black-white wealth gap’ into a ‘race-inflected class gap’.

There is, however, a limit to relying only on a wealth tax. As with simply printing money we cannot pretend that just taxing the wealth of the richest households will provide all the revenue we need. Middle income workers will also have to see their taxes raised. First, because there isn’t enough super-rich to finance all our expectations on an on-going basis. Second, because environmental pressures demand limits on the growth of private consumption, and taxes are a mechanism for limiting individual spending and channeling the funds toward collective services that are kinder to the environment, like education, healthcare, and public spaces.

Third, winning workers over to accepting a greater weight to public (collective) consumption is not just an environmental concern but a socialist one. Public consumption can further economic equality and involves a cultural change that speaks not so much to consuming less, but to consuming *differently* and, one would hope, *better*. Think, for example, of taxes securing better healthcare, water supplies, schools, libraries, public transit, parks, recreation centers, cultural activities, an end to poverty, and that myriad of universal services that would make it easier to look to more time off work as productivity increases.

Winning the working class to high taxes will not be easy, but it will be impossible without an especially high tax on the rich. Wealth taxes, such as an emergency one-time wealth tax, are therefore a *condition* of gaining broad acceptance for the taxes needed to pay for what we want from governments. Wealth taxes are doubly egalitarian: they take more from the rich (from each according to ability to pay) and, if distributed properly (to each according to need), the pool of taxes collected from both workers and the rich will disproportionately benefit the working class.

Conversion

The environmentalist movement has impressively raised environmental consciousness, and the Green New Deal has effectively placed the issue of massive environment-oriented infrastructural investments on the public agenda. Yet the call for a ‘just transition’ for those threatened with job loss generally has limited resonance amongst workers. Without the power to *deliver* on the promises, the

demands come across as slogans rather than actual possibilities. And without linking the call for a fair transition to concrete struggles in specific workplaces and communities, the promise of a just transition is too vague to engage workers.

The dilemma we face is that, on the one hand, the urgency of the environmental crisis tends to push us to develop a mass base as quickly as possible. On the other hand, emphasizing that environmental advance will mean introducing comprehensive planning and taking on the property rights of corporations (you can't plan what you don't control) is something that risks limiting the base in the short run because of its radicalism and would, in any case, not be won except over an extended period of time. There is no short cut here; there is no way forward other than telling the truth, winning workers over to its implications, and developing a movement able to replace capitalism.

Directly related, as the exemplary work of Green Jobs Oshawa emphasizes, popular demands are often too vague to engage workers; missing are concrete links to everyday struggles: the loss of jobs, the loss of the community's productive capacities, addressing the potential of alternative production for social use. Without such engagement, it is near impossible to overcome the impact of accumulated defeats over decades that have not only lowered expectations of what can be achieved but even erased just *thinking* about alternatives.

The significance of a strategic emphasis on 'conversion' is that it links environmental issues to retaining and developing the productive capacities we will need for the environmentally sensitive transformation of everything related to how we work, travel, live, and play. It shifts the focus from the trap of looking to private corporations competing for global profits, to inward development, where possible, and applying our skills and resources to planning for *social use*. And it is only in engaging in struggles and campaigns that are both immediately concrete and national (and international) in scope, that it becomes possible to develop confidence in genuine possibilities.

The political demands this raises require new capacities largely undeveloped in the state's historical record of coping with administration of a capitalist economy. Specific institutional proposals would include a) the creation of a National Conversion Agency to monitor closures and the run-down of investment to the aim of

placing productive facilities that corporations no longer find profitable enough into public ownership and retooling them for social use; b) identification of markets for environmentally-friendly products and service through government procurement of the products; c) the creation of decentralized (regional) environment-techno hubs staffed by hundreds of young engineers exploring unmet community needs and mobilizing or developing the capabilities of addressing them; and d) establishment of elected community conversion boards to oversee the local economic transformations.

This brings to the fore again the question of financing. One dimension of a response is a levy on financial institutions for a fund to address environmental restructuring. Having bailed finance out in desperate times, such a levy is a reasonable quid pro quo. Yet if capital – especially highly mobile finance capital – is left with the right to move whenever it is unhappy, it also retains the blackmailing power to undermine democratically determined goals. Capital controls are, therefore, both a defense of basic democratic principles and a practical necessity.

Taking the questions of democratic participation and engagement seriously would mean mobilizing workers in their community or through their collective organizations. Labour councils would be encouraged to actively participate on the community environmental boards, and locals would be called on to establish conversion committees in workplaces, supported by research and funds from the national unions. These workplace committees would monitor the productive state of their workplaces, address what they were producing and what products they *might* produce, act as early-warning whistleblowers to check corporate environmental failures and inadequate investment plans, and use the mandate of the newly constituted National Conversion Agency to disrupt production when the social interest is at stake.

Unionization

Protests may surface via all kinds of struggles – student movements, fights for gender equality, anti-racist demands, immigrant rights, and so on – but as Andre Gorz famously noted, the trade-union movement still carries, in spite of its weaknesses, “a particular responsibility; on it will largely depend the success or failure of all the other elements in this social movement.”

The 'card check' has been the main legislative change emphasized by unions: if a majority of workers sign up for the union, it must be automatically (legally) recognized. More radical steps would include banning any corporate attempt to influence workers' decisions on unionization; banning, as well, the use of scabs to undermine workers on strike, a particularly critical measure in first contracts when unions have not yet had a chance to consolidate a solid membership base; and, given the general imbalance in employer-worker power, removing the prohibition against worker refusals to handle or work on goods shipped from a struck plant ('hot cargo').

The present moment could not be more favourable for pushing Biden and the Democratic Party to defend unionization and prioritize legislating the card check. The link between rising inequality and the decline in union density has been well documented, and various social movements have indirectly laid vital ground for unionization. This was the case with Occupy, which highlighted popular anger over how extreme income inequality had become. This was soon followed by the fight-for-fifteen, revealing widespread support for lower-paid workers.

That struggle was endorsed by unions, who insisted that even if the demand was met through legislation, unionization remained essential: to extend the monetary improvements to workplace rights and to block employers from recouping by other means what the law forced them to do re wages. The pandemic qualitatively increased the potential support for unionization to a new level, as empathy for front-line workers grew on matters of both pay for their special risks and the failures of employers to do everything possible to provide proper equipment and the safest possible work environment.

There is skepticism on whether Biden will come through on the card-check, which he had also endorsed as part of the Obama-Biden ticket but then reneged on. But there is also a question about the extent to which higher union density, in itself, would result in greater class-consciousness or even effective unions. Canada currently has more than double the union density of the US, yet the labour energy is greater in the US. Sixty years ago, the share of the US workforce in unions was almost triple its roughly 10 per cent today. Yet unions weren't able to block or even significantly moderate the subsequent context in which they operated (slower growth, more mobile capital, more international competition, more aggressive corporations, hostile governments).

The crisis in American unions lies in their general failure to effectively come to grips with those changes. What they now con-

Buoyed by new enthusiasm and power, a revived labour movement could lead an upsurge against the social rot at the heart of the American empire: appalling inequality, permanent working-class insecurity, stunted lives, punishing austerity, decaying infrastructure and the contrast between the liberating promise of technology and the confining reality of daily life.

front is not just the need to add members but also the need for *transforming* union structures and aspirations to the end of overturning the incapacitating context they confront. This does not negate the importance of legislation sympathetic to unionization – it is absolutely crucial – but it poses the hope that

a legislative breakthrough (as opposed to various minor reforms) might be seized on by unions as a once-in-a-union-lifetime chance to reverse labour's death by a thousand cuts.

In the 1930s, the United Mineworkers, fearing that if Big Steel weren't unionized the miners would be isolated, sent some hundred organizers out to organize steelworkers into their own union. It is that kind of foresight and boldness that needs to surface once again. Only a virtual *crusade* could lead to the kind of dramatic leap forward essential to making unions into a confident and leading social force. Only through the ferment of an explosion in unionization might we see a reordering of union priorities and structures, the engagement of rank and file members in the struggle for unionization, and the emergence of new leaders and new blood. And if this leads unions to penetrate Amazon warehouses and Walmart distribution centers with all their disruptive power and bring workers as far apart as personal care workers and Google programmers into the organized working class, then the class as a whole will be strengthened.

It is fundamental that, if union leaderships do come to enthusiastically embrace the spread of unions, they do not ignore their own members. If they don't first get their own members on side, the shift in resources and attention outward will be resented and undermined. If leaderships ignore the working conditions of their own members, especially in regard to workplace health and safety (which has gained such prominence since the pandemic) and unrelentless speedup, the drive to increased unionization will falter. Leadership must get and retain support from their members for moving on to organize other workers, with the added benefit that such high-profile struggles uniquely demonstrate to non-union workers that unionization really matters.

Buoyed by new enthusiasm and power, a revived labour movement could lead an upsurge against the social rot at the heart of the American empire: appalling inequality, permanent working-class insecurity, denial of the most basic needs like universal health coverage, stunted lives, punishing austerity, decaying infrastructure and, finally, the contrast between the liberating promise of technology and the confining reality of daily life. And it is that kind of example that can inspire young people – Black, white, Hispanic, Asian – to view labour struggle, once again, as where the action is. From there, unions could ambitiously move on to confront and reverse the economic context that underpinned their years of defeat: 'free' capital movements, corporate driven 'free trade', the prioritization of 'competitiveness' over all else, and the distancing of life below from decisions made above.

From a 'Class-Focused' to a 'Class-Rooted' Politics

Capitalism has, by and large, been successful in making the kind of working class it needs: one that is fragmented, particularist, employer-dependent, pressured by its circumstances to be oriented to the short-term, and too overwhelmed to seriously contemplate another world. The challenge confronting the left is whether it can take advantage of the spaces capitalism has not completely conquered and the contradictions of life under capitalism that have blocked the full integration of working people, to *remake* the working class into one that has the interest, will, confidence, and capacity to lead a challenge to capitalism.

This is primarily an *organizational* task. Policies matter, of course – there is no organizing without fighting for reforms – but the choice

of policies to focus on, and the forms the struggle for those reforms takes, must be especially attuned to their potentials for organizational advance. The above emphasis on a wealth tax, for example, is based on keeping inequality in the forefront, and thus, creating fertile ground for mobilizing anger and raising more fundamental questions. The emphasis on conversion points to the necessity of radical economic and state transformations if we are to address our most critical needs. As well, it emphasizes the centrality of engaging workers in ways that can develop their understandings and capacities. The emphasis on unionization is closest to a policy directly addressing working-class power, but it too locates policy primarily in terms of it serving as a catalyst for transforming unions, not just ‘growing’ them, and so leads on to expanding future strategic options.

For the socialist left, in a context in which the only viable option for the time being seems to be to operate within existing political parties, the foremost task is how to manoeuvre through the institutional morass these parties inhabit and use the openings to support the most promising workplace and community struggles; restore a degree of historical memory to the working class; and contribute, through campaigns and discussions of lessons learned, to developing the individual and collective class capacities to analyze, organize, and act.

Out of this comes the most difficult undertaking: the project – cultural as well as organizational and political – of creating a new politics that, as Andrew Murray so clearly put it, is not only ‘class-focused’ but is also ‘class rooted’. That is, the invention of a left agenda that is not just engaged in periodic working-class struggles but is also genuinely embedded in workers’ daily lives and committed to nurturing the best of the working class’s historic potentials. •

Sam Gindin was research director of the Canadian Auto Workers from 1974–2000. He is co-author (with Leo Panitch) of The Making of Global Capitalism (Verso), and co-author with Leo Panitch and Steve Maher of The Socialist Challenge Today, the expanded and updated American edition (Haymarket). This article was originally published on September 6, 2020, and is online at socialistproject.ca/2020/09/political-openings-class-struggle-during-and-after-pandemic/.

The Socialist Interventions

Pamphlet Series

- Stefan Kipfer. 2020. *The Naked City: Traversing Toronto in pandemic times.*
- Aaron Lakoff et al. 2020. *Palestine and the COVID Crisis.*
- Sam Gindin et al. 2020. *Take the Plant, Save the Planet: The Struggle for Community Control and Plant Conversion at GM Oshawa.*
- OCAP. 2017. *Basic Income in the Neoliberal Age.*
- Eleanor Marx, et al. 2016. *May Day: Workers' Struggles, International Solidarity, Political Aspirations.*
- Sam Gindin 2015. *Global Issues: Bringing Class Back In.*
- Greg Albo and Carlo Fanelli. 2014. *Austerity Against Democracy: An Authoritarian Phase of Neoliberalism?*
- Stefan Kipfer, et al. 2012. *Free Transit.*
- Angela Joya, et al. 2011. *The Arab Revolts Against Neoliberal Economies: Confronting Capitalism?*
- Marta Harnecker. 2010. *Ideas for the Struggle.*
- Socialist Project. 2009. *Financial Meltdown: Canada, the Economic Crisis and Political Struggle.*
- Michael A. Lebowitz. 2009. *The Path to Human Development: Capitalism or Socialism?*
- Labour Committee. 2008. *Labour Movement Platform.*
- Richard Roman and Edur Velasco Arregui. 2008. *The Oaxaca Commune: The Other Indigenous Rebellion in Mexico.*
- Labour Committee. 2007. *The Crisis in Manufacturing Jobs.*
- Hugh Armstrong, et al. 2005. *Whose Health Care? Challenging the Corporate Struggle to Rule Our System.*
- Carlos Torres, et al. 2005. *The Unexpected Revolution: The Venezuelan People Confront Neoliberalism.*
- Leo Panitch. 2005. *Whose Violence? Imperial State Security and the Global Justice Movement.*
- Sam Gindin. 2004. *The Auto Industry: Concretizing Working Class Solidarity: Internationalism Beyond Slogans.*

All pamphlets are available at socialistproject.ca/pamphlets.

About the Socialist Project

The SP is a Toronto-based organization that supports the rebuilding of the socialist Left in Canada and around the world. Committed to the development of a more free, democratic, humane and sustainable society than the one we live in, the SP opposes capitalism out of necessity and supports the struggles of others out of solidarity. We support struggles aligned with working class emancipation, anti-oppression, democratic self-determination, planetary sustainability, and peace.

You may contact us at info@socialistproject.ca or visit our website at socialistproject.ca.

Front cover: Sanders rally in Long Island City, October 2019.
Back cover: Wildfires on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Ron Reiring, 2009.



SP **SOCIALIST
PROJECT**