



**DSA and the
Labor Movement**

The Rank & File Strategy

A Guide from the
Democratic Socialist Labor Commission

A Strategy for Socialism

Problem 1: The organized working class is weak and the level of class struggle, despite recent bright spots, is low. Only a small percentage of workers are in unions. But without a large, confident, well-organized working class movement, we cannot get close to socialism.

Problem 2: At this point in our history, socialists, for the most part, are separated politically and socially from the majority of the working class.

Solution: The rank-and-file strategy attempts to bridge this divide: socialists join with and learn from worker leaders in a common effort to foment badly needed class struggle. Through this open conflict with employers, workers can come to see themselves as leaders and build class power.

How We Do It: A number of tactics can bring DSA as an organization into close contact with organized workers and enable our members to learn from their fellow workers.



Introduction

The challenge we face today is one that socialists could not have imagined just a few years ago: how to advance socialist politics on a mass scale. As impressive as DSA's growth has been in recent years, we have a long way to go.

It's not just that we need more socialists; we also need them in the right places. That means more respected leaders and organizers throughout all sectors of the multiracial working class, capable of moving people to action.

This is not some romantic or nostalgic vision; it is based on a strategic assessment that the organized working class is the only force with both the material interest and the place in the structure of the economy to transform society and build socialism.

In previous eras socialists were often respected workplace leaders. These radicals helped organize workers into a collective force that went beyond workplace fights and into the political arena.

That is much less common today. The left often finds itself on the outside looking in when workplace struggle erupts. Socialists are more likely to be organizing strike support than leading strikes.

This divide has weakened both workers' movements and the left. The socialist movement is stronger when tied to workers' movements, and vice versa. Rebuilding the link between them is key to revitalizing both, and to keeping our movement grounded in the reality of workers' lives.

That's where the rank-and-file strategy comes in. It provides a strategic vision for re-linking workers' movements and the left.

The Cold War purges of left-leaning union leaders and the shift of union leaders toward business unionism resulted in a staid bureaucracy unwilling to

combat concessions, and a demobilized rank and file that too often lacks the organization to fight its own battles. One goal of the rank-and-file strategy is to reform unions into sites of class struggle: democratic, member-led movements with the confidence and cohesion to fight and win real power.

It would be easier if there already existed such a strong workers' movement that socialists could just dive into. Instead, much of the labor movement is weak and on the defensive. That's why our challenge is two-fold. We need to help create a "sea of class struggle for socialists to swim in." And we also need to rebuild the link between socialists and the majority of the working class.

To do this we connect with workplace leaders, those who do the day-to-day organizing. Socialists can both learn from these leaders and help make the connections that let them know they are part of something bigger – not just a union, but a working class – that is capable of fighting, winning, and ultimately ruling. We want to create the conditions where fighting for a socialist future makes sense to ever larger groups of workers.

Why Unions Matter

Given the weakness of the current labor movement, why focus on unions and workplaces as key to building socialism? Simply put, because the working class, including socialists, can only develop the consciousness and skills needed to transform society through active struggle with the capitalist class, and the workplace is the most direct and obvious site for that to happen.

Even in labor's diminished state, there are more than 14 million union members in the United States. That's a solid base to start with, and few other organizations can match the resources that unions have.

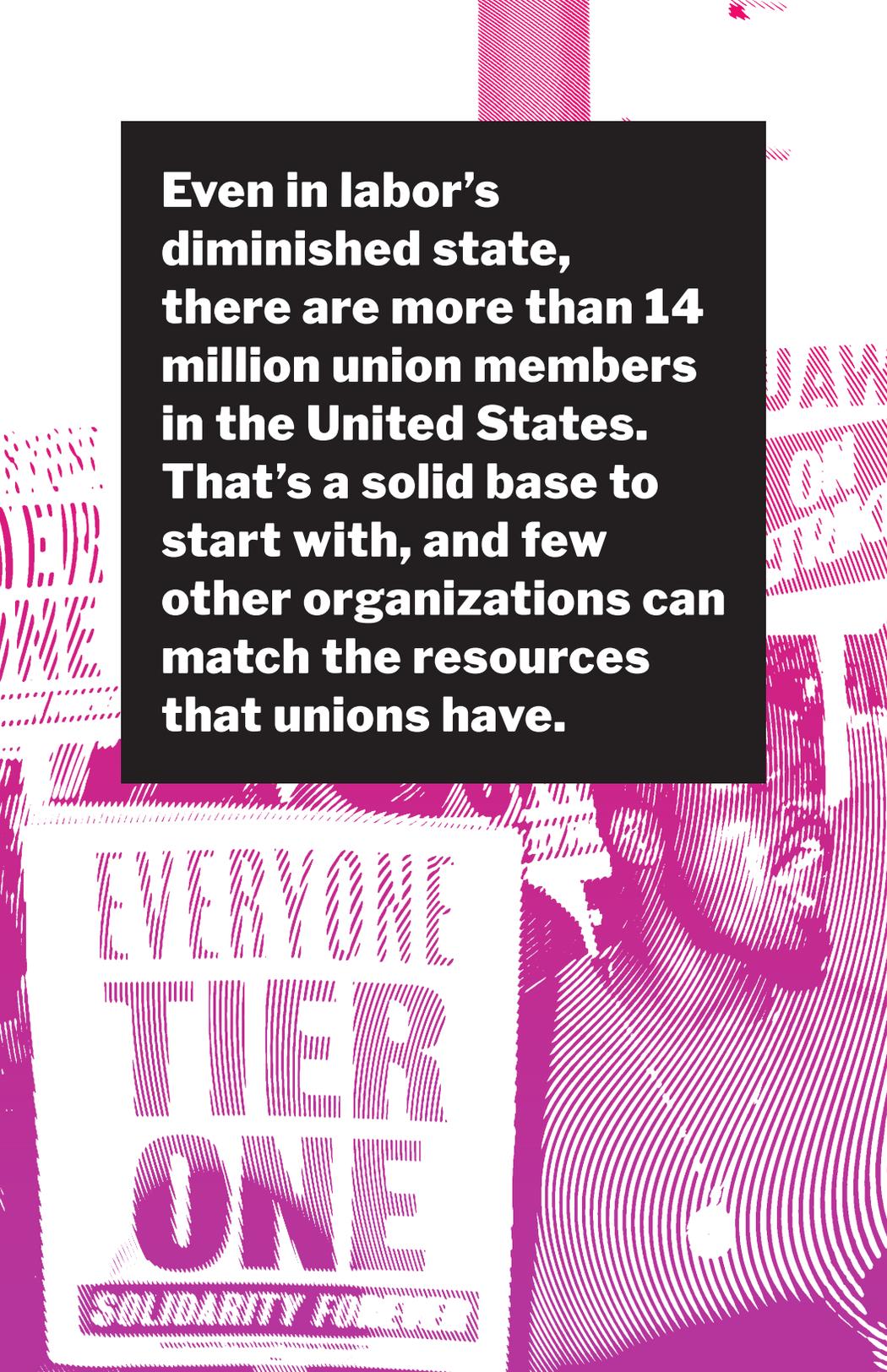
What's more, even though unions have much work to do against racism, sexism, and homophobia, the workplace is the least racially segregated institution in society, where the working class comes together when they show up for work every day and have to work together simply to get the job done. Unions create structures that can forge bonds of solidarity across race, gender, religion, region, immigration status, and more.

Unions give workers a platform to wage class struggle in a coordinated and sustained way. The fact that actually existing unions often fall short of their potential means that a central part of socialist strategy must be to strengthen unions, not bypass them.

But fomenting class struggle in the workplace is only part of the job. To close the gap between workers in struggle and organized socialists, DSA chapters can be proactive about seeking out relationships with unions and other worker organizations such as workers centers. We want to be allies in their



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**EVERYONE
TIER
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SOLIDARITY FOR ALL

fighters with the boss and we want them as allies in our broader campaigns such as Medicare for All and a Green New Deal. We need to rebuild the reputation of socialists and make normal and natural the relationship between socialists and labor.

This pamphlet offers a how-to manual for DSA members who want to put the multi-pronged rank-and-file strategy into action. It includes actions DSAers can take in the workplace and work that chapters can do as chapters.

The Rank-and-File Strategy: What It Is, and What It Is Not

The rank-and-file strategy is a broad vision based on the idea that struggles for concrete gains reshape people's understanding of what's possible – and of what they themselves are capable of. It is only in a context of raised expectations that people on a mass scale can be won to the idea that workers can and should be in charge. We want to join with worker leaders to raise those expectations!

► **The rank-and-file strategy is not a single tactic. “Encouraging socialists to take union jobs in particular industries” is just one part of a broader strategy.**

Helping to rebuild a layer of militant workplace leaders is not something that today's socialists can accomplish by themselves. Even if every single DSA member dropped everything and found a job in a strategic industry, we would be far short of rebuilding that leadership layer.

► **The strategy is not anti-staff or anti-leadership. It does not mean that socialists should avoid union staff jobs or leadership positions. On the contrary, militant unions require talented leadership and dedicated staff.**

Without an active, organized membership, union staff and elected leaders will be limited in what they can do, no matter how well-intentioned. At worst, they are too often subject to conservatizing pressures.

The core focus is to find and work with militant, respected, workplace-based leaders. A necessary step will be to run for elected positions, and it will make sense for these reformers to hire socialists as staff to help implement their agenda. In today's best examples, staff have played a big role in helping train rank-and-filers and strengthen their unions.

► **The rank-and-file strategy is not just about current union members; organizing the unorganized is a key component. We need millions more workers in unions so that they are better positioned to fight further. We can't expect a strong socialist movement when only one in**

ten workers belongs to a union. And fighting your boss to win a union is one of the best consciousness-raisers.

Given the size of the non-union workforce, organizing at a scale that can make a difference will require existing unions to take on that enormous job. Of course, millions of workers belong to unions that don't encourage them to recruit their neighbors. Those unions need change from within in order to find the confidence and ambition to gamble on new organizing.

When reformers took over the Chicago Teachers Union, for example (see page 14), they went on to organize charter school teachers into their local. Recognizing the threat of the low-wage Amazon model, in 2021 the Teamsters United reform slate pledged to put millions of dollars into a long-term plan to organize Amazon.

And new organizing becomes much easier when unions are fighting and winning – the power of a good example. When the Teamsters won their historic strike at UPS in 1997 (see page 18), FedEx workers began calling the union seeking to join too. As then AFL-CIO President John Sweeney observed: “You could make a million house calls, run a thousand television commercials, stage a hundred... rallies, and still not come close to doing what the UPS strike did for organizing.”

► **The rank-and-file strategy is not DSA's only strategy for getting to socialism. We run in elections and participate in all kinds of social movements that organize working people toward power. The rank-and-file strategy is a part of our politics that is specifically about organizing workers as workers. ■**

★ A National Strategy

The rank-and-file strategy has the advantage that it can be implemented just about anywhere in the United States, even in areas of low union density. Our work is stronger when we can make national connections. Every county in the U.S. employs teachers who are either already union members or who have the potential to become so. Likewise with UPS workers, USPS workers, grocery workers, telecom, and other national industries. Health care workers and airline workers are widely distributed. Amazon is hiring and opening new warehouses all the time. DSA members who want to hook up with unions, either as members getting jobs or as chapters making connections through campaigns, can find them in their local areas.

CASE STUDY:

1 Daily Life in the Rank and File

Pam, a DSA member in Brooklyn, started at Verizon (then Bell Atlantic) in 1999. She's a splicer in the construction department, working in manholes, running fiber cables, and installing fiber terminals.

I first worked at two different worker centers organizing Latino immigrants, one in El Paso, my first real job out of college, then in New York. Those were good experiences but also frustrating. The power the workers were able to build was limited since they didn't have a union.

I wanted to learn a skill, and I didn't want to be in an office all the time. I liked the idea of being a technician, working with my hands and being outside. I knew the phone company was a good union job, a job people stuck with.

It's really been a great job. I like the camaraderie with co-workers. I like the straightforwardness of the job: say you have a circuit you have to fix, it's clear when it's done and whether you did it right. I've been able to have a steady schedule and be there in the evenings and weekends with my family.

What I don't like is that often I don't know what my job for the day is going to be. Sometimes it's boring. Sometimes it would be nice to have more decision-making power over your day.

So it's important to get a job you think you'll like, because most of your time is spent doing the work. I was on the job for a lot of years when there wasn't a lot of room to do much with the union. My local was very top-down when I started and there wasn't a lot of space for new members.

I became a steward in 2001 and I learned a lot from other stewards, but I felt constrained by the fact that the officers didn't want people to rock the boat. That led to an effort in 2008 where a few chief stewards ran for office. They lost that election, but it was a first step toward major changes in the local. I was part of a reform group that ran a full slate in the 2011 election and won.

Since I've been at the phone company we've struck four times. The 2016 strike was the most significant experience I've had as a union activist. Strikes are hard and stressful, but they're also a time when you feel your power as workers. Things open up.

Before that strike, people felt beaten down by the company's surveillance and the excessive discipline. When the national union called the strike, there was a 180 degree turn – really overnight. Going on strike changed it from

something happening to us to something we had the ability to change. It was amazing to see how members stepped up.

Every day we protested outside the hotels where the company was housing scabs. Before 7am you'd see hundreds of strikers in red shirts outside the hotel, raising a ruckus, and usually hotel management would come out and agree to kick out the scabs.

We followed the scabs all over the city, picketed wherever they were doing work, info-picketed all the Verizon Wireless stores. Other unions adopted stores to help bolster our picket lines, and we got tons of public support outside the stores. We held mass rallies and marches that helped keep the strike in the press.

This was during the New York Democratic primary race, and Bernie Sanders was in New York in the early days of the strike. Bernie honored strikers at a huge rally on the first day, and we held a mass march across the Brooklyn Bridge to the Sanders/Clinton debate. Bernie talked about Verizon as a prime example of corporate greed and how our issues affected everyone. The national attention Bernie brought helped raise the strike's profile and keep morale high.

People at the phone company have a deep-seated sense that this is a good job because the union has made it a good job. There's a reason most members stay for 30 years or more. There's an awareness that the benefits and job security were won through strikes and all the on-the-job organizing that happens in between. There's a collective sense that people before us fought and won those things and we have a responsibility to not let them slip away.

There was a lot of time over the years when things weren't very exciting or it felt like we were really on the defensive. But the 2016 strike made me realize you have to stick it out, because you don't know what's coming and sometimes it's not what you expected.

If someone asked my advice, I'd say it's important to be somewhere for a long time. It's important to find a job you're going to enjoy day to day and that you can do for a long time.

Don't go into it thinking you know more than the people who work there about how things should be run. Recognize that you have a lot to learn in terms of the job, the history of management-worker relations, the history of the union. You're there to build relationships and to be a part of something bigger and to contribute what you can to that collective effort, but there will be lots of stumbling blocks along the way. Don't be afraid to try and fail.

★ YDSA and RFS

From 2018 to 2021 YDSA had the rank-and-file strategy as a national priority. In 2018 YDSA helped produce and distribute DSA's pamphlet *Why Socialists Should Become Teachers*. In 2020 members voted to build a pipeline to prepare students for strategic jobs. YDSA's National Labor Committee launched a survey of members' career plans and held a number of mass calls, including a jobs fair featuring panels of rank-and-file organizers in healthcare, education, and logistics.

Small cohorts of YDSAers are working toward getting union jobs. Oscar Fregozo, a junior at UC Berkeley, attended the 2021 YDSA Rank and File School and intends to get a job in or for a union after he graduates, most likely in logistics. The most interesting part of the school, he said, was “the context given about socialists’ roles historically in the labor movement with the CIO and their multiracial organizing, and the effect their expulsion had on the labor movement. Also people’s experiences, working in unions, and seeing that the labor movement is not always welcoming of socialists but there is a strong community doing that work. It made me feel more realistic about the choice, and more determined.”

One YDSAer who has already graduated and gone to work is Whitney Witthaus, a teacher in New York. Studying food systems in college brought her in contact with food workers and farm workers, and soon she realized “it wasn’t just food workers, it was all workers.” Going to North Dakota for the DAPL pipeline protests was the “first time I saw people fighting, and it was beautiful.” She returned to school to help found a YDSA chapter, which soon helped union campus workers on strike.

After graduation she was accepted for a job as a union organizer but decided it wasn’t for her. A stint at a nonprofit was unsatisfying, as she saw how profoundly different from her own were the lives of the workers the organization was supposed to represent. She had conversations with DSA Labor Branch members in New York who were organizing on the job.

“I felt excited by the prospect of being on equal ground instead of this tremendous distance,” Witthaus said. “I had never imagined myself as a teacher, but when I was accepted to the NYC Teaching Collaborative, it was a joy explosion.”

Now she belongs to the Movement of Rank-and-file Educators caucus in the teachers union. “Teachers get to be creative every day,” she said. “The work is so entirely fulfilling. My co-workers are awesome. I have opportunities every single day to move people toward collective action.”

Putting the Rank-and-File Strategy to Work

What does the rank-and-file strategy mean for DSA members and chapters? Here are concrete steps that members and chapters can take, along with examples of how DSAers are already putting the rank-and-file strategy to work.

Strategic Jobs

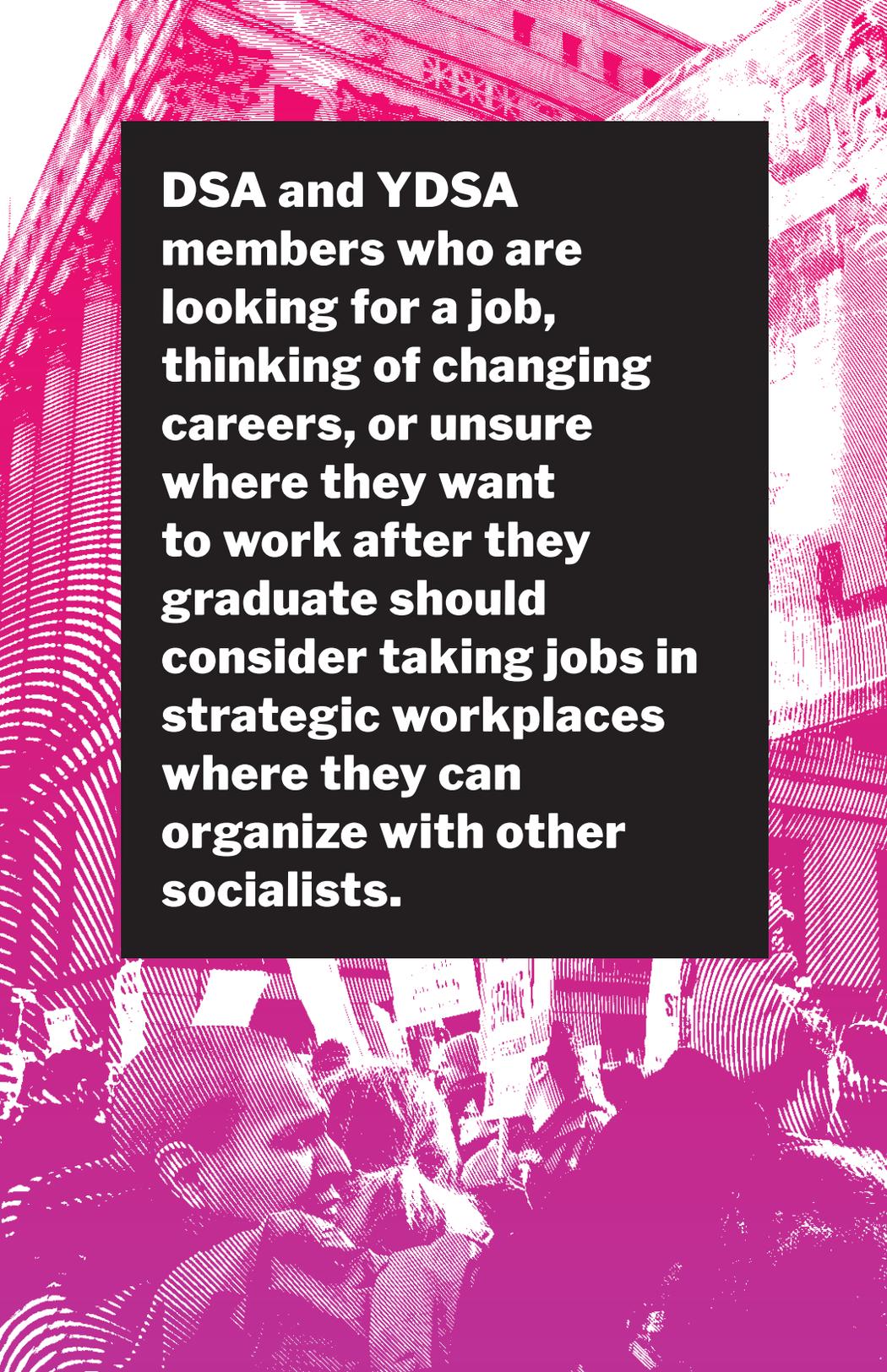
DSA and YDSA members who are looking for a job, thinking of changing careers, or unsure where they want to work after they graduate should consider taking jobs in strategic workplaces where they can organize with other socialists. In some cases this could entail further education or certification.

DSA labor committees can figure out key workplaces in their cities and encourage members to get jobs there together. It is important not to go into this project alone. Chapter labor committees can set up regular meetings for those getting new jobs, along with mentoring from more experienced comrades or from experienced non-DSA union members who know the lay of the land in your new local. In the best case the chapter supports the union member and the union member creates connections from their union to the chapter and recruits co-workers to DSA (see examples below).

Portland DSA set up four “socialist job fairs” over two years, at a union hall and a community center. At each one, representatives of organizing committees in different workplaces presented what they were doing and then sat behind tables where the 50 or so attendees could follow up. The organizing committees were in non-union, trying-to-unionize, and already-union workplaces.

Besides using social media to advertise, the chapter put up fliers in coffee shops and community colleges, attracting some non-DSA attendees. Registrants were vetted first by phone or in person, to weed out management spies (none were found, but there were some folks who thought it was a regular job fair). They were told the location on the day of. Specific employers were not mentioned until organizing committee members had talked one on one with the potential new hire.

“People have salted into non-union spaces such as hotels, restaurants, manufacturing, warehouses, and social services,” said Portland DSAer Jamie Partridge, “but we’re oriented more and more in the last year to already



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unionized places.” He cited the Letter Carriers local, which has a reform caucus, where DSA members came in through job fairs, as they did into the Portland public schools: “They’re coming in as cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and some are thinking about getting a degree. We hope to have a mentor program for those going to school to become teachers.”

What do we mean by a “strategic workplace”? That could be argued at length. When socialists chose industries in the 1970s, they generally went into blue-collar jobs that were linchpins of the economy: auto, steel, the Post Office, trucking, telephone. From 2018 to 2021 YDSA focused on K-12 education, healthcare, and logistics as its targets.

Strategic workplaces could vary from place to place. In New York the Labor Branch went through a lengthy process of first deciding on criteria for “strategic” workplaces in their city. The criteria included economic leverage, social/political leverage, ease of entry, demographics, working conditions, and whether DSAers were already working there. The branch then applied those criteria and ended up voting for a total of six target industries: nursing, teaching, UPS, transit, building trades, and city government. Labor branch members made presentations at each of the city’s geographic branches to explain the strategy and the priorities and to encourage DSA members to choose one of these jobs.

How might we assess different sectors? Teaching and healthcare raise the potential for coalitions with others in the community – parents, students, and patients. They offer an opportunity to “bargain for the common good.” When teachers speak up, people listen – especially if schools are closed in a strike – and nurse is one of the most trusted professions. Healthcare workers have a central place in fighting for Medicare for All. In addition, these jobs are not vulnerable to being outsourced abroad and less threatened than others by automation.

Teaching is also attractive because of its recent outburst of militancy--the strike wave of 2018-19--and many educators organized around safety during the pandemic. A teachers’ strike creates a kind of political crisis in the city where it happens. Healthcare too saw a ripple of worker actions demanding COVID protections in 2020.

A strategic sector could also be one that is central to the economy and thus causes disruption when workers strike, as in the 1997 walkout at UPS (logistics) or the 2019 strike at General Motors (manufacturing). Manufacturing is still a huge profit center in the U.S. economy. Workers who bring down a cascading number of employers feel their power. ► *cont. p. 16*



CASE STUDY:

1 Chicago Teachers: A Textbook Case

The experience of radical and socialist Chicago teachers is a textbook case of the rank-and-file strategy in practice: finding the organic leaders who are already there, organizing for power in the union, making alliances with the community, organizing and teaching members to fight the boss, fighting that boss, winning strikes – and raising the consciousness of thousands of educators.

In 2008 a small group of Chicago teachers began meeting. Some had been trying to stop the closing of their neighborhood schools. Their local union was a lumbering bureaucracy that was absent from the pressing concerns of students and educators. They started recruiting other teachers and read about the history of their local, rank-and-file caucuses in other unions, and Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine*.

This group called themselves CORE, Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators. They began modeling the work the union should have been doing – going to every hearing on school closings, critiquing the school system’s budget, meeting other outraged educators and parents. “The old CTU leadership never thought about the parents, ever. It was just bread and butter, take care of the members,” said special ed teacher Kristine Mayle.

In 2010, CORE beat the odds by getting elected to lead the Chicago Teachers Union. Immediately the new leaders set up an organizing department and began a plan to rebuild the union at the school level. They emphasized identifying and training leaders in every school to talk one on one with fellow members and begin rekindling the idea that the union could actually do something about bad working and learning conditions.

CORE leaders believed it would take a strike to change the balance of power with “Mayor 1%” Rahm Emanuel. All their organizing – their Contract Action Committees in each school, alliances with parents and community organizations, phone banking new members, setting up a month-long summer organizing institute, their strike vote and their practice strike vote, built toward

that possibility. They began with small but measurable asks such as “wear red Fridays,” where school staff could see for themselves how many of their co-workers were backing the union’s campaign. Ninety percent of teachers – and 98 percent of those voting – said yes to authorizing a strike. Their slogan was “The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve.” They called out administrators of the mostly Black and Latino system for creating “educational apartheid.”

CTU’s nine-day strike in 2012 brought 35,000 school workers and supporters into the streets of downtown Chicago and turned around the then-current national narrative – that teachers were to blame for everything wrong with the schools. Here teachers were fighting for students’ lives: smaller class sizes, nurses and social workers, music, art and physical education, as well as raises for workers.

Although the contract didn’t win everything and included a few setbacks, there was no question among educators and every resident of Chicago who had won the strike, and it wasn’t Rahm Emanuel. CTU President Karen Lewis became a national figure and two years later was a viable candidate to beat Emanuel in the next mayoral election until she had to withdraw due to illness.

CTU went on to a one-day strike in 2016 demanding school funding, and an open-ended strike again in 2019, this time putting housing and the school-to-prison pipeline at the center of the union’s demands and forcing the mayor to come up with money she claimed was not there. They won steps towards a nurse and a social worker in every school, a ban on new charter schools, 40 percent wage increases for paraprofessionals, improved enforcement of class sizes, more case managers and homeless coordinators, and a sanctuary schools policy for immigrant students.

Each battle that CTU waged produced more rank-and-file leaders and heightened member initiative, including the battle to protect educators and families with a safe school reopening plan. The transformation of CTU altered the political terrain in Chicago, helping to create the conditions that allowed six DSA members to be elected as alders in 2019.

► *cont. from p. 13* National sectors generally offer greater organizing opportunities; the Postal Service, grocery and retail chains, airlines, telecom, and many others fit the bill.

Because patience, humility, and longevity are crucial to our plan, DSAers should find jobs they will enjoy doing for a long time. As 20-year veteran Pam notes (see page 9), “Most of your time is spent doing the work.” You can contribute to certain drives, and learn a lot, with a quick in-and-out “salting,” but the kinds of co-worker relationships we’re talking about building require some seniority.

The jobs we’ve mentioned are certainly not the only ones where DSAers can contribute to class struggle. Some jobs that could be strategic offer very low pay or are hard on the body; they can be difficult to maintain long-term. We need a combination of “important” (relatively large and impactful) and “sustainable.” The point is to think through what makes sense in your city with your cohort of DSAers.

Ongoing support and coordination are key. Some chapters, including Detroit and Los Angeles, have set up “workers’ circles” where DSAers and their co-workers, union and not-yet-union, can strategize around day-to-day organizing challenges and get feedback from experienced members. In some chapters mechanisms are more informal. DSA labor activists will be effective to the degree that they plan together and learn from each other, from other comrades – and especially from their co-workers.

National Networks

DSAers who are already in the relevant unions should work in existing national networks of K-12 educators, campus workers, nurses, Teamsters, United Auto Workers (UAW) members, and postal workers. There we find workers with wide-ranging contacts who are already thirsting to fight the boss and to democratize their unions. Often local reform caucuses exist as well.

Teachers in the United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE), for example, often led the fight for safe schools during COVID. A national network of postal union activists has sought DSA’s help. UAW members in Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) campaigned for direct election of their officers. Teamsters for a Democratic Union supported candidates for top offices in 2021 and will agitate for a contract campaign at UPS in 2023.

Where there are local groups of union members like these, DSA may be able to offer practical support, invite speakers, invite union members to educational events, or do fundraising. The goal is always to bring together socialists with workers who are fighting.

Strike Support

Strikes are not common enough, but they are great opportunities to develop relationships with willing unions. It’s not bad just to show up at a picket line (see Denver example p. 24), but far more effective is to offer aid long before the strike jumps off – which is possible only if you know it’s going to happen, which in turn is possible only if DSAers are in the union or close to it. Read on below for some ways to build connections with locals long before strike time.

In building strike support, the first thing to figure out is what the chapter has to offer union members that will strengthen their strike.

- Connections with unions or other organizations that will support the strike materially and morally. What relationships can the chapter or individual members call on?
- Research on the employer’s vulnerabilities
- Technical help with leaflet making, communications, media strategy
- Fundraising
- Tasks during the strike, such as food distribution, child care, and picket line presence

It is difficult to offer support if local officers are uninterested, which is most likely if (a) they’ve never heard of DSA or (b) they have never tried to mobilize their own members. They may be wary of socialist outsiders. ► *cont. p. 20*

★ Jobs on Staff

Many DSA members are union staffers and play a crucial role in the work of the union and by supporting the membership—even in unions with bad leadership. Staffers are often in the room with union officials and can weigh in on important issues, like a new organizing target or political strategy. But staff members’ ability to help build rank-and-file power varies widely depending on the elected officials who pay their salary and direct their work. If staffers are told to get out the vote to defeat Bernie Sanders or Medicare for All, for example, they may risk being fired if they object.

Even in unions with conservative or ineffective leaders, union staff can and often do work behind the scenes to support members. It’s risky and can be invaluable for union reformers. But unions aren’t going to reach their fullest potential without an active and engaged membership, capable of building democracy, directing the union’s affairs, and winning leadership. The kind of power and change we need can only come from the union’s members.

CASE STUDY:

1 Teamsters for a Democratic Union

Few projects represent the rank-and-file strategy better than Teamsters for a Democratic Union. TDU is a reform movement inside the 1.4 million-member International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), one of the largest and most powerful unions in the country because it primarily represents workers in logistics.

TDU was founded in 1976 in the aftermath of a wave of wildcat strikes that shook the freight industry. It started as an alliance of socialists who had taken Teamster jobs and a layer of militant truck drivers who had been organizing against contract concessions.

They faced an uphill battle in the Teamsters, which was notoriously corrupt and controlled by the Mafia. Braving goon squads, they took on do-nothing leaders and organized to beat back concessions. They achieved some important early victories in the 1970s and 80s by voting down national contracts in freight and UPS, even though union rules requiring a two-thirds majority to reject thwarted the membership's wishes.

By 1989, the U.S. Department of Justice was set to impose a government trusteeship on the IBT for its deep ties to the Mob. Instead, TDU won a major victory by persuading the DOJ to require the union to give members the right to vote for their top officers.

Having won the right to vote, TDU helped organize an insurgent campaign for Teamster leadership, headed by Ron Carey, a former UPS driver and head of New York Local 804. In 1991, Carey and his slate won an upset victory.

With Carey in office, TDU faced the challenge of how to transition from a scrappy outside force serving as a thorn in the side of union leaders, to being a supportive but independent movement helping to shape and implement the new leadership's reform agenda. TDU did not dissolve following Carey's victory, understanding the importance of maintaining an independent leadership layer in the union.

TDU's organizing paid off most noticeably in the 1997 UPS strike, which saw 185,000 Teamsters walk out in the largest private sector strike in the U.S. in years. The union focused on the precarious condition of part-time workers at UPS; its message of "Part-Time America Won't Work" resonated, garnering broad public support. Meanwhile, the rank-and-file organizing built up over years ensured that UPS workers stuck together. After being out for two weeks, UPS Teamsters won what many deemed labor's biggest victory in decades.

Unfortunately, the resurgent IBT was unable to build on the victory at UPS,

as a few of Carey's aides engaged in a campaign fundraising scandal that resulted in Carey being removed from office, even though he himself was later exonerated in court. With Carey out of the picture, old guard figurehead James P. Hoffa, son of the Mob-connected James R. Hoffa came to power in 1998 and remained till 2021.

In the face of this setback, TDU returned to its roots, focusing on rank-and-file organizing around workplace demands, winning office in some key locals. TDU led successful national "Vote No" campaigns in freight, carhaul, and UPS – although arcane union rules sometimes allowed Hoffa to impose the contracts anyway.

In 2016, a TDU-backed reform slate came within a few thousand votes of defeating Hoffa, shocking the union leadership, and six TDU-backed candidates swept the Central and Southern regional elections. As old guard unity started to crumble, TDU kept organizing for better contracts and member mobilization.

In 2021 a seven-year campaign by dissident retirees led to a major victory, as Congress agreed to backstop ailing multi-employer pension funds like the Teamsters' big Central States Fund. The Butch Lewis Act, named for a TDU leader in Cincinnati, shored up pensions for millions of workers, after years of union-busting and concessions had weakened pensions and led to cuts for many.

In 2021, Hoffa stepped down. The Teamsters United slate, a coalition of TDU with longtime local-officer allies and with former Hoffa allies, won the membership vote two to one against Hoffa's team. New officers pledged to take on both Amazon and UPS.

Throughout its 45-year history, TDU has focused on the core tenets of the rank-and-file strategy: identifying and building a layer of respected workplace-based leaders; bringing workers into struggle around workplace issues that affect their lives; building power from the bottom up while contesting for union leadership where it makes sense; and whether or not in office, focusing on fighting the boss.

There have been plenty of setbacks, and much work left to do. But few other workers' organizations can match TDU's longevity, along with its record of concrete victories affecting millions. TDU remains an example and ally for insurgents in other unions, from teachers to auto workers.



► *cont. from p. 17* On the eve of a strike you may be able to convince a reluctant but desperate executive board they could use DSA's help, but the best remedy is a prior relationship.

A good example of DSA strike support that tightened connections between the chapter and union members happened at Alameda Health System (AHS) in the Bay Area in 2020. This was actually support for the union's months-long contract campaign, in which DSA built relationships with rank-and-file leaders, and which then culminated in a winning strike.

An East Bay DSA member and nurse, Johnny Pearson, was president of the AHS chapter of Service Employees Local 1021, and he introduced DSA members to union activists more than six months before the strike. The fight was going to be a political one: leaders knew that in order to get a decent union contract, the health system would have to be "unprivatized."

Twenty-two years earlier the County Board of Supervisors had voted to give up control of its public health system (ten hospitals and outpatient facilities with more than 3,500 union workers) to an unelected Board of Trustees. The

results for patient care and working conditions were predictable. Administrators referred to their system as "the company." The AHS unions, representing nearly all the job titles in the system, would need to build public support for the county to take back control – a tall order.

In March 2020, Pearson introduced DSA members who had various skills or organizing experience to elected officers who six months earlier had run with him on a slate dedicated to energizing the union. The DSAers explained that (a) they believed in strong unions and (b) as Alameda County residents and patients, they too had an interest in a well-run health system where workers had a say. They made clear that this was not a one-way, "we want to help you" relationship.

The DSAers began by assisting workers with a plan for a press conference, and as the campaign escalated, the DSA working group grew and more DSAers learned new skills. They brought social media expertise, video experience, and organizing savvy.

Over the course of the campaign union members and DSAers organized town halls that drew 100 people, featuring union activists and DSA's political candidates who supported them, held an art build for picket signs and a mural painting session, produced videos, did car caravans, sponsored many email and text campaigns to pressure the Board of Supervisors, and held a dozen phonebanks to get DSA members out to AHS picket lines. Footage of the first action DSA helped organize was shared by Bernie Sanders's campaign, which drew attention, and they used the contact list the chapter had built up during Sanders's presidential run.

All this work was possible because of weekly Zoom meetings between DSA members and chapter leaders, both the new officers and rank-and-filers. "We built a strong relationship over Zoom," said Molly Stuart, the EBDSA member who led the solidarity effort. "Once the collaborative relationship was established, Local 1021 members would bring ideas to the meetings and continue developing them with DSA members through follow-up one-on-ones, which could sometimes be done in-person with social distance. I wonder how much bigger it could have been without the pandemic barriers."

Stuart emphasizes having something to offer: "It came in handy, especially in the beginning, to have media, art, and action planning skills. If we had shown up and said 'we want to help, we don't have any ideas or resources,' we might have still been able to be involved, but I don't know if they would have wanted to meet with us every week."

On the second day of the October strike, the Board of Supervisors

demanded the resignation of the AHS trustees and announced they would make AHS a public system once again. The workers' months-long campaign had won!

Stuart advises DSA chapters who want to support strikes or other worker organizing to “get involved as early as possible” and to build relationships first: “If we had shown up at the first press conference trying to proselytize for DSA, that would not have led to the same kind of collaboration. Once relationships are strong, people will naturally be curious and excited about being invited personally to find out about your organization.” And a number of the new union leaders did in fact join DSA.

Building Labor Notes

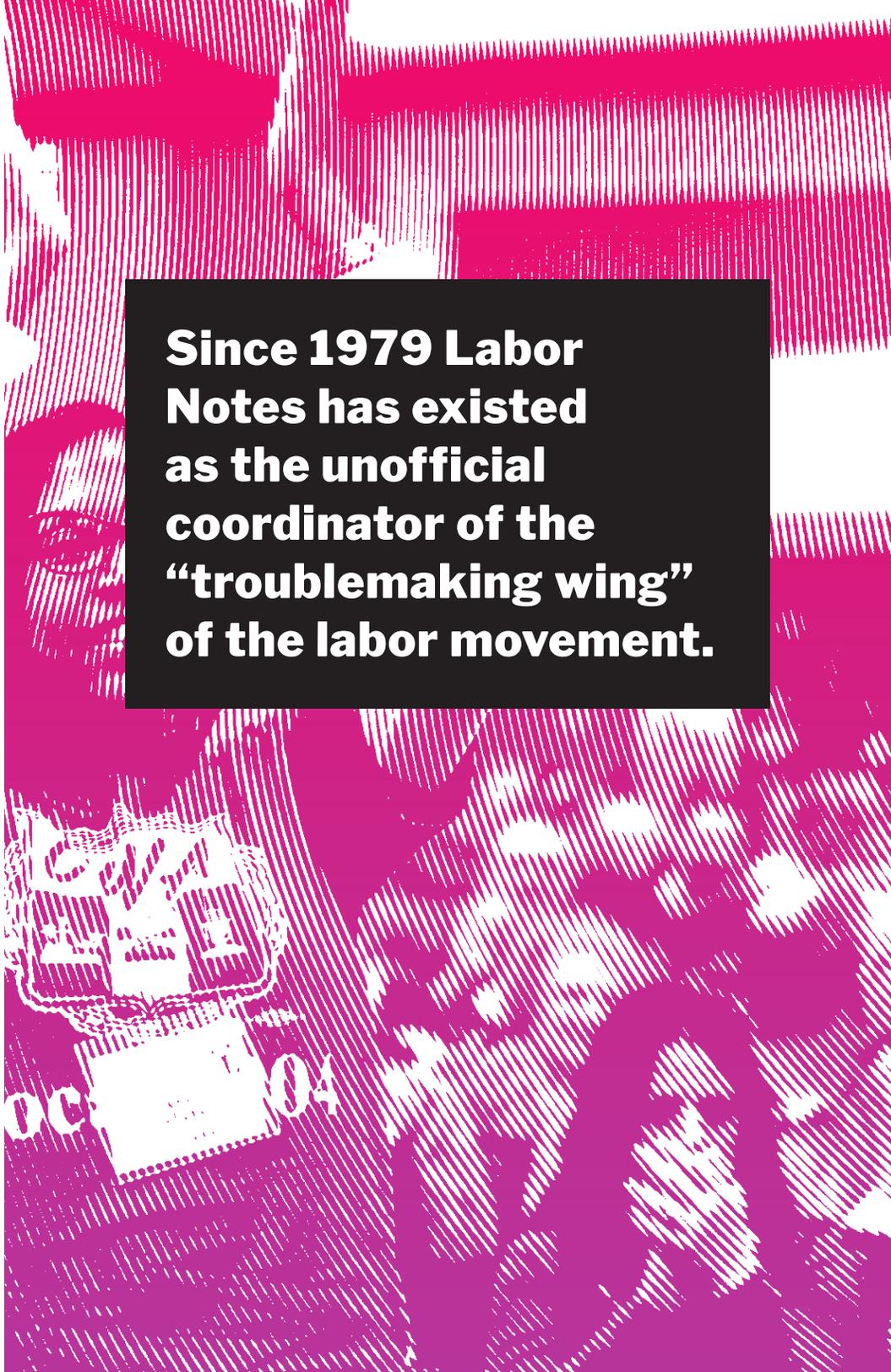
Just as important as building shop-floor and local struggles is connecting workers across unions and regions – allowing worker activists to experience that they are indeed part of a bigger movement of people who think like them. Since 1979 Labor Notes has existed as the unofficial coordinator of that “troublemaking wing” of the labor movement – that is, the class-conscious current we’ve been talking about. It does so through its articles and books, through its industry-specific networks of activists in K-12 schools, the Postal Service, nursing, and higher education, through trainings put on for local unions, and through national and local conferences that draw thousands of participants.

The conferences bring together workers from different unions to learn from each other. They solidify the notion that “you are not alone”: there are many others working to “put the movement back in the labor movement,” as Labor Notes’ slogan goes. DSAers can bring co-workers to these biennial national conferences where the electricity in the room energizes attendees for months to come.

They can also help other unionists organize one-day local conferences (Troublemakers Schools) where workers learn organizing skills and discuss big-picture political questions. In the best case the local organizing committee for the school stays together and sponsors other events.

Although Troublemakers Schools aren’t DSA projects per se and need to be organized by a broad committee, DSAers can initiate them, build them, speak at them, and bring their co-workers to them.

Many chapters use Labor Notes training materials, in particular a facilitator’s guide for a three-part training based on the book *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*. Portland DSAers, for example, trained a dozen DSAers to lead these sessions, which sometimes spun off organizing committees in attendees’



Since 1979 Labor Notes has existed as the unofficial coordinator of the “troublemaking wing” of the labor movement.

workplaces, even leading to successful union drives. In New York City, the Labor Branch alternated regular monthly membership meetings with Labor Notes-style trainings led by members, and members brought their co-workers – a good introduction to DSA.

Taking Our Campaigns to Union Members

Unions can be key connections for our campaigns for candidates, Medicare for All, and a Green New Deal. The same goes for other campaigns that arise, such as for personal protective equipment, the PRO Act, or Black Lives Matter.

Chapters should be familiar with the locals in their area and know their political proclivities. When a national union endorses Medicare for All or the Green New Deal, it becomes easier to approach a local. Chapters can offer to sit down with officers or the appropriate union committee to discuss how they can work together (without assuming that the local is 100 percent on board with what the national has passed).

We can ask to make presentations at union meetings and request official support in the form of donations, publicity, and recruitment of volunteers. Of course, such requests carry more weight when coming from a member of the local, or even from a member of another local (see sidebar p.22). They are more likely to be successful when the ask is “how can we work together?” rather than “come join our existing campaign.”

In Portland, DSA’s electoral working group launched a tax-the-rich ballot measure to win universal pre-school at the same time that the labor working group was helping DSA members organize a union at a local pre-school chain. Those pre-school workers helped create a Childcare Workers Alliance, both for mutual support during the pandemic and to promote the pre-school ballot measure. DSAers in the Portland teachers union and in the National Organization for Women mobilized their members for signature gathering and to get out the vote. The ballot measure won, the union election was won, and Portland DSA’s labor connections and credibility rose dramatically.

Here’s a case where several kinds of chapter outreach worked together: When General Motors workers struck for six weeks in 2019, Denver DSAers searched social media to find whether there was a GM facility nearby. They discovered a small and fairly isolated UAW local. The DSA chapter not only sent five to ten people to the picket line every day; they organized other unions, such as the teachers and communications workers, to mobilize their own turnout. One night a central labor council activist brought a projector and everyone watched the movie “Pride” – which is also about an “outside” group supporting strikers. ► *cont. p. 28*

★ Don’t Let a Crisis Go to Waste

When COVID hit, the Philadelphia chapter’s labor branch began getting new people involved, including non-members. “It was such a shocking thing, we established contacts we probably wouldn’t have otherwise,” said teacher Paul Prescod. “Leaders wanted any kind of support.” Guests were invited to branch meetings to share what they were doing in their unions.

At the same time, President Trump was attacking the Postal Service. The branch reached out to postal workers they’d known through Labor for Bernie and, in coalition with Postal Workers Local 89 and Communities and Postal Workers United, held two Save the USPS rallies, put on a virtual phone bank, and flyer-ed customers at post offices across the city.

They had heard that some rank-and-file sanitation workers were demanding hazard pay and PPE. A teachers union member cold-called a contact and brought that sanitation worker to a DSA meeting, where he described the situation. The branch assigned two people to work with the sanitation workers on organizing their members, helping them with a plan for outreach and a systematic way to track it. They developed a petition demanding hazard pay and PPE that was signed by hundreds of sanitation workers.

That work culminated in two lively demonstrations, with sanitation workers defying their boss’s threat to fire them if they attended. DSA held virtual phone banks in the summer, targeting the commissioner who controlled PPE.

The rank-and-filers DSA was working with then decided to topple their do-nothing union officials. They put together a slate and beat the 24-year incumbent. The relationship continues. When the chapter held a phone bank to support Philly teachers fighting for a contract, the new sanitation local VP came to give a pep talk.

“As a labor branch we were doing something timely,” Prescod said. “We were bringing members together from different unions to figure out how to respond to COVID. No one else was doing it. It speaks to having a structure in place, so when something blows up workers have somewhere to go.”

In 2021 the Philly labor branch looked at union contracts that were due to expire that year and reached out to locals in their area. Luckily, many were ones where they already had relationships. They asked DSAers to sign an “I’ll Be There” form pledging to help the locals with phone banking, picket line support, or whatever they needed to win a good contract.

That fall, Prescod announced his run for the state senate and quickly garnered union endorsements. “The labor support is an organic outgrowth of the work our labor branch has done with locals over the years,” he said.

CASE STUDY:

🔗 Integrating Union Work and Electoral Work

Shane Ruiz is a staffer for a healthcare local in California.

In East Bay DSA's Medicare for All campaign, we've put together phone-banks and collected signatures to pressure the governor to request a federal waiver so California can pursue statewide single-payer. I've been working to cohere our labor activists to get their unions to endorse the petition and to then circulate the petition among members and do political education about single-payer.

Our DSA Medicare for All Committee assigned two or three people with labor organizing experience to meet with all of our rank-and-file activists doing this work. We mapped out who the activists were and what unions they were in and had regular one-on-ones with all of them. The idea is to craft our labor activists a campaign that is custom to their unique situations.

A first step is to get our DSA members to pass a resolution in their union. If a union is lucky enough to have internal democracy and it's politicized enough that resolutions are regularly submitted by rank-and-filers or leaders, they should take advantage of that, because that's not true at a lot of unions. We can help them write the resolution, we have templates. But that's the easy part. The challenge is getting the activist layer of the union, much less members who aren't already politicized, into action around single-payer.

If we're going to beat the insurance industry and the big employers it's going to take hundreds of thousands, probably millions of people to demand it in a real way: demand it at the voting booth, in mass protest, and if possible in the future, by withholding their labor. That means having lots of conversations with regular people about politics in a world where that is not the norm at all.

The specifics of the work really depend on the situation and the union. If someone is in a progressive union with a culture of democracy, they could probably organize an 100-person Zoom call on single-payer and have the people who show up write down five people they think they could organize into joining the committee and signing the petition.

This work wouldn't be possible without the relationships we've developed through our past work. In the course of the 2018 teachers strike, through our support work DSA got very close with a whole layer of people in the Oakland Education Association and there is a lot of overlap between DSA members and the active layer of OEA. And we worked with Service Employees 1021 to

help put the Alameda Health System back in public hands (see page 20). Now there is an elected 1021 member who is on the system's board of trustees and who is helping us with this campaign for single-payer.

When I think about the rank-and-file strategy in terms of my work in DSA, it's about how to integrate the strategy into our legislative and electoral work. How are we orienting ourselves toward the already organized working class, particularly its rank-and-file members? How are we politicizing them? How are we incorporating them into our campaigns? How are we getting them to politicize their unions through our campaigns?

There's this desire to separate out the rank-and-file strategy from our electoral work, but the whole point is to synthesize those two things and to get working people into struggle around basic necessities of life and having them taken out of the market. That's the stage of American politics we're in.



► *cont. from p. 24* When municipal elections came around, the UAW local was so grateful for DSA’s support that officers asked if there was anything they could do to help, and ended up endorsing DSA’s three candidates for school board and city council. One, Juan Marcano, had come to the picket line himself, and was elected to the Aurora, Colorado city council. It was one of the first political endorsements the local had made. And a couple of union officers started coming to DSA meetings.

The Rank-and-File Strategy and Politics

While the rank-and-file strategy focuses on workplace organizing, it goes well beyond shop floor issues. DSA’s issue campaigns and electoral organizing can be integrated into our union work.

In New York, for instance, a group of teachers who were also DSA members helped build a loose network of hundreds of Educators for Bernie. Later, they and members of MORE, a reform caucus in the New York teachers union, organized to support teacher Jabari Brisport, running for State Senate with DSA’s backing (his union supported his opponent). The DSA Labor Branch also held phonebanks for all six of DSA’s candidates that cycle, enlisting members from different unions into the campaigns, all of which won.

When the Black Lives Matter uprisings kicked off, the Educators for Bernie group renamed themselves Educators for Black Lives and coordinated mobilizations to the protests. These efforts brought in hundreds of rank-and-file educators not in DSA.

When making political endorsements, union leaders often don’t engage their members nor ask much of them. But the Sanders campaign inspired thousands of members to insist they should have a say in which candidates their unions backed. “Labor for Bernie,” an independent effort that many DSAers or future DSAers joined in 2016 and 2020, brought the rank-and-file strategy to politics and inspired deep conversations with co-workers.

In 2020, Union Members for Bernie, part of Sanders’ official campaign, organized people to talk to their co-workers on the job and in their unions. They organized house parties to do workplace mapping, assess which of their co-workers supported Bernie, and make commitments to phonebank and knock doors.

The campaign also canvassed at workplaces. In the lead-up to the Iowa Democratic caucus, staff and volunteer organizers, including DSAers, went to the JBS Pork Plant in Ottumwa to talk to workers who would soon have a special satellite caucus at their union hall. They went multiple nights in a row from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. and engaged in long organizing conversations about

the workers’ lives and the struggles they faced, securing commitments to caucus for Bernie and to talk to their co-workers. Organizers did follow-up house calls. Some of the workers helped identify organic leaders in the plant and in their immigrant communities, particularly among Ethiopian workers, leading Bernie to win the caucus among JBS Pork workers in a landslide.

The campaign continued this kind of work in the lead-up to the Nevada caucuses among Las Vegas casino workers. The leadership of the large and influential Culinary Union issued literature to its members that misrepresented and vilified Medicare for All, and Bernie by extension as the candidate supporting it. But volunteers, including many DSA members, spent days and nights speaking directly to Vegas Strip workers – leading to a landslide victory for Sanders. Workers gave rousing speeches for Bernie and how his program would improve their lives, the opposite of what their union leaders had promoted.

Not all efforts to reach union voters met with success. When reflecting on attempts to canvass auto workers in Michigan, Union Members for Bernie staffer Jonah Furman lamented, “We were between six months and 40 years too late.” The absence of class struggle in their union made it harder to interest auto workers in a class-struggle candidate.

The 2020 Bernie campaign showed the upper limit – about a third of the national Democratic electorate – of what socialists can achieve electorally without more class struggle. No matter how inspiring the politicians, they can’t magically cause big changes in how people think and vote come election time. That work has to be done between elections. Getting voters to vote for a class-struggle candidate will become much easier when millions of people have the first-hand experience of class struggle in their own lives. ■

A Game Plan for DSAers

We can't create socialists on a mass scale simply by convincing people of better ideas. Rather, we have to create the conditions in which socialist ideas can thrive. That's hard in a world where most workers have little experience of their collective power.

For socialist ideas to flourish, we need a movement where workers have a sense of their collective power and know how to use it. Historically, socialists have played key roles in building the mass workers' movements that have changed the world. Many DSA members and chapters are already doing this work. DSA can create direct relationships with unions and workers who are looking to fight; these are the people we will learn from and who will transform our organization. We can:

- Educate DSA members about unions and the local labor movement.
- Launch a jobs program for those interested in taking strategic jobs
- Create support structures for our members in these jobs
- Support members organizing new unions in their workplaces or choose strategic targets to organize
- Join and build union reform caucuses
- Do strike and contract campaign support through connections with workplace leaders
- Build and use the Labor Notes network
- Connect local unions and worker leaders with broader DSA campaigns such as M4A and Green New Deal
- Work with unions on electoral campaigns for DSA-endorsed candidates.

Building socialism requires a working class that can fight for it. Today's working class has been disorganized by decades of demobilization and defeat. That's why rebuilding working-class fighting capacity must be a top priority for socialists. The rank-and-file strategy is key to accomplishing this.

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