

Young Democratic Socialist Perspectives

July 14, 2015

Earlier this year, four leaders of Young Democratic Socialists (YDS), the youth section of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), began to collaborate on a response to the New Politics prompt: What is the left we need today?



We are Noelle Nieves Flynn of Northampton Community College Democratic Socialists in Easton, Pennsylvania; Shelby Murphy of Lamar University Democratic Socialists in Beaumont, Texas; Shannon Sorhaindo of William Paterson University in Paterson, New Jersey; and Russell Weiss-Irwin of City College of New York in New York City. We discussed how we, all relative newcomers to the socialist left, think about the left as a whole in the United States, especially based on our geographically diverse experiences organizing in predominantly working-class schools.

Before we began working on the article, we discussed what our chapters are working on. At Northampton Community College, Noelle and her comrades are participating in the \$15 Now struggle, the first time that Noelle can remember that the labor movement has ventured into her part of rural Pennsylvania. At Lamar University and William Paterson University, Shelby and Shannon and their comrades are organizing against tuition increases and pushing for tuition reduction, as well as doing work around the Black Lives Matter movement. At City College of New York, Russell and his comrades are also participating in the Fight for \$15 and working with cafeteria workers to fight layoffs. In all of our chapters, we pair movement work with collective education, whether through radical movie nights, discussion groups, or readings by socialist authors.

We began with a question:

Russell: When you think of “the left” or “our side” in all the struggles happening around us today, what makes you proud and hopeful? What do you see as missing?

Noelle: What definitely makes me proud is how when something big happens with the potential to unite us (Occupy, Ferguson), we write about it, we rally around it. What’s negative is that we rally more around “social justice” than labor and union-related issues. Unions are a key pillar of socialist politics, but we don’t really do much to encourage youth to continue fighting for unionization.

Something else I’m proud of is our being able to attract youth through social media and using things like texting, Meetups, and Hangouts to keep up with one another. It helps us learn to connect despite our distance from each other. One thing that seriously disappoints me about the left is the political divisions. Leftists find more to hate about each other than to like. I personally disagreed with some things about the Ferguson uprising, and was ignored by a lot of people for a while. With our movement so fragile, I think we need to get over some of our different issues and work together against capitalism and to inspire radical change. *Then* we can argue all day long.

Shelby: What makes me proud to be a part of the left is our ability to overcome oppression by the media. If you’re on the left you automatically get a huge negative stigma put upon you. The media has labeled socialist activists as “rabble rousers” and “lawbreakers” and other things along the lines

of “socialists are lazy and just want to feed off of the wealthy’s profits.”

But despite this negativity, we continuously fight and we refuse to back down. We strive to show people how our work is their work; if we fight together, we win together. I have met some of the strongest and most intelligent people while being a part of the movement, and those that wish to label us as “uneducated” and “lazy” are incredibly wrong; it’s obviously only a tactic to scare people away from the left. Our work ethic is relentless: in comparison to others in politics, I believe we have them beat, because we work 24/7 to try to make revolution possible. We don’t represent a political ideology that requires people to only show up for elections in order to fix society’s problems; we are so much more than that. Real change requires commitment. This is something that other political ideologies don’t advocate.

One problem is our inability to come to a consensus on *how* to dismantle capitalist society. We sometimes tend to get caught up in our differences with each other rather than critiquing our enemies.

Russell: Why does the left remain marginal, and what can be done to overcome this problem?

Noelle: One reason people seem not to take the left seriously is because of a lack of education. People don’t know that socialism isn’t just social equality and “sharing everything,” but economic and political equality with thought-out structure and planning. Political economy isn’t everyone’s cup of tea, but it’s important for us to encourage understanding it among chapter members and other socialists. Being educated is something anyone can respect. Being able to answer questions reinforces the fact that we know what we want and what we’re talking about.

Russell: I think that’s a good point, Noelle, and I also think mutual education helps us have more democratic organizations, because more people have the knowledge and skills to know what’s going on.

However, I wouldn’t want people for whom, as you say, political economy is not their cup of tea to feel like they’re not smart enough to be part of the socialist left.

Noelle: I think that actually leads into a good new question. The people we most often represent are those who often lack the means to achieve formal education or are discouraged from wanting to self-educate. How can we make a socialist movement more attractive to the most disadvantaged members of the working class?

Russell: I’d be interested in all of your takes on that question, but my initial thought is that there are at least two elements to that. The first is removing barriers to participation, that is, making our movement more accessible to the most disadvantaged members of the working class, and the second is making our goals and efforts inspiring and relevant to those folks.

For instance, on the first front, the accessibility question, how do we make our meetings and groups not feel clique-y in the ways we act or the language we use? How do we accommodate busy work and school schedules, long commutes, need for child care, mobility issues, and so on? How do we make it so that anyone who wants to participate in our organizing can do so?

The next piece, I think, which is also essential, is the question of how we make our organizing something that people want to participate in. What issue is most important to working-class and oppressed people in our schools, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods? Is it wages? Tuition? Health care? Violence from police or rapists? I think we have to pay attention to where people are at and organize around the issues that affect people most, energize people most. I think if we’re both

accessible and relevant, we will attract all kinds of folks, but especially the most disadvantaged working-class people.

Noelle: I think something YDS and DSA are good at is reaching minority groups. I work with the Disability Caucus, and there are other groups for gender and sexuality, racial minorities, and self-identified women. Encouraging participation in these groups is important. When it comes to minorities, though, we often overlook the opinions of those who struggle on a daily basis. Whether we decide to organize discussion specifically around the working poor or learn to give them a better voice is something we have to figure out. As a member of that demographic, wages are absolutely the biggest barrier. Even a \$15-an-hour increase is barely a living wage when health care costs come into play (as well as ineligibility for SNAP [Supplementary Nutritional Assistance Program], MA [Pennsylvania's Medical Assistance program], and LIHEAP [Low-income Home Energy Assistance Program]). We need to help the working class look ahead. Issues like this are incredibly frustrating, where there are no loopholes. We can show how the wealthy can still qualify for MA by petitioning governors, while the poor making \$15 more than the income limit sit in a pile of medical bills. It's honestly not too difficult to explain, but socialists who do come from a financially secure background do need to imagine life without food for a day or choosing between paying for medication and risking death.

Shannon: The one important barrier that separates the most disadvantaged workers from our movement would definitely be our language. Members of DSA and YDS tend to go into conversations and topics using various terms and ideas that someone outside of the organization would probably find to be a bit complex. There are new members who take the time to figure out these conversations and understand the language on their own, but in general, individuals who don't understand it are likely to back out of the movement feeling that they don't know enough.

As an organization, I think that we need to express our ideas more straightforwardly. This should bring disadvantaged members into the movement. We should teach basic ideas to such people and work with them until they feel comfortable and motivated enough to start researching and learning on their own. In time, this will make them more inspired to engage in openly socialist organizing and activism.

There are many ways that we can accommodate to the hectic schedules that everyone has. Surveying members as to their availability would be a good place to start. Meetings can be held in person or over video or conference calls, which will help with the different locations and commuting situations of members. Since social media is so big and just about everyone has a profile on at least one website, we can also find out what websites members use frequently so we can more easily communicate.

There are many ways that anyone can participate in organizing. There is much more to do than only participating in rallies. There is a lot of planning involved. We can see what tasks members are comfortable doing. Some people like to be behind the scenes while others like to be in the forefront. Some may be comfortable doing outreach for events, figuring out the logistics, or leading the protests.

Shelby: I think one way to make our organizing something that people want to participate in is to provide them the resources to learn specifically about why we are working on specific issues. In my chapter I have a lot of students who are interested in certain things but they only have a general idea of the issues involved. They understand that they want to fight against student debt and tuition increases, but they feel as though they don't completely understand the ins and outs of why and how this has become a problem. It makes them feel as though the enemy has an advantage because they know how to manipulate us, they created the system. So we can only break the system if we know all

the facts, how it was built, in order to fight against it. I think we need to make sure that our education is put in the best “layman’s terms” and make sure we define the terminology that we use so we fully understand everything.

Russell: I think all of those things make sense! But I think a lot of this stuff is easier to say than do. Sometimes people use jargon or language that other people don’t understand just to seem smart and exclude others (I think especially in universities/academia), but plenty of the time, people use that kind of stuff because it’s harder not to.

For instance, if you’re thinking about the world through a Marxist lens (which I think is a really good way to think about it), you start to see lots of things as dialectical, or conflicts between capital and labor, or hegemonic, or whatever. Once you start to think that way (which we should, I think), you naturally want to use the words that you’re thinking when you speak and write. It’s often shorter, too!

So, I agree with Shannon that we should make the effort to talk in ways that make us accessible to everyone—in fact, that will probably help us think more clearly as well. I’m just saying it’s hard!

But what if we dig a little bit deeper. In many other places, the left is more powerful than in the United States. At other times in our history, the left has been more successful (1910s, 1930s, 1940s, 1960s, 1970s) and less successful (1920s, 1950s, 1990s, 2000s) than it is now. How come? How can we help to make the left less marginal than it is right now in the United States?

Honestly, the fact that the four of us have come into contact with socialist politics and decided to dedicate a lot of our energy to building a socialist organization shows a certain kind of success for the U.S. left in the 2010s—that young people in different parts of the country are getting drawn into this movement is already good. But what was it that drew us in, and why aren’t more people getting drawn in? I think those are some of the questions that we have to ask when we think about what keeps the left marginal and how we can change that.

I think when we compare ourselves to the left in other countries, we have to bring up imperialism. U.S. leftists are organizing at the center of a global empire. For decades, being a communist or a socialist has been a dangerous thing in countries all over the world—in Chile or Spain or Iran or South Africa, it could get you killed by the state. But I think in the U.S. it’s been unique—for decades, as far as most people were concerned, to be a socialist or a communist meant you were the enemy of your own country and people, not just of capitalism. And I think that is a really powerful perception that we have to overcome today, even for people born after the fall of the Soviet Union.

What do you all think about this question of why the left is more marginal here than in other places?

Noelle: I think the U.S. is great at undermining revolutionary politics. For example, the New Deal pacified some of the working class’s anger and contained it. We need to show working-class people that Band-Aids don’t heal deep wounds. Proving to people how corrupt their government can be, and showing how collective action can make radical change, is what we need to be able to do. The radical left has allowed itself to become so organizationally divided that we’re seen as a group of raving lunatics, looked down on even by liberals who think working with us to achieve progressive social policies means they’re working with “Communists.”

We finished our conversation a bit abruptly, but we were able to talk about a lot of the questions that we, as young socialists, see in our broader movement. There are questions of division within the left, the kinds of language we use to talk about our ideas, our ability to educate ourselves and one

another, what issues we choose to organize around, and how we represent ourselves as socialists and how we are perceived. There's certainly a lot more to say about the left we really need in the United States, and even more to do. We in Young Democratic Socialists/Democratic Socialists of America are continuing to struggle with these questions and with the day-to-day challenges of organizing. We are excited to join the larger conversation within the left that this forum in New Politics represents.

Solidarity,

Russell, Shannon, Shelby, and Noelle

Footnotes