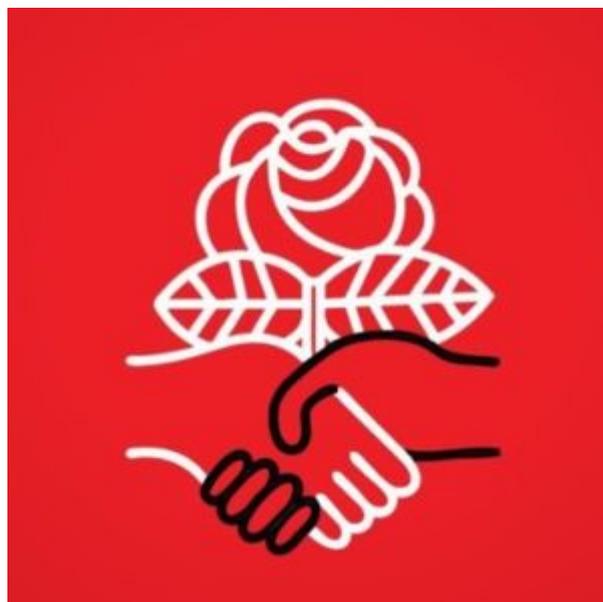


Lessons from the East Bay Democratic Socialists of America

A recent article, written by Abigail Gutmann-Gonzalez and Keith Brower Brown, in the Bread and Roses caucus's blog, *The Call*, asserts that the East Bay DSA's campaigns have been a remarkable success. The title of this essay, "Lessons from The East Bay," purports to dissect the chapter's campaigns thus far.

^[1]The East Bay DSA (EBDSA)—a chapter that I am a part of—covers an expansive geography and has a number of barriers that are admittedly difficult to tackle. So far, the chapter has put most of its focus on difficult electoral work in which underdog candidates and electoral measures are pitted against a well-heeled opposition. Credit is due for EBDSA leadership for their dedication in these endeavors. However, in my view, Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown's essay does not sufficiently assess the chapter's work.

The piece in question neglects two important points that can allow us to derive lessons from the EBDSA experience. First, the analysis should have asked if the chapter, with and alongside the East Bay working class, have become *materially* empowered by the EBDSA's campaigns. I will detail this below, but the article omits some obvious problems. Most troublesome is the Oakland Educational Association's (OEA) teachers strike. The tentative agreement was bitterly contested by many leftward OEA members who ultimately were unsupported by EBDSA.



Their concerns rightfully aligned with a general socialist perspective: the contract did not prevent 24 planned school closures^[2], and that OEA pay raises might be given at the expense of essential school programs and other union classified staff. One day after the strike's end, the school board implemented nearly 22 million dollars in cutbacks.^[3]

Second, given the deep problems with the particular campaigns, Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown should have been compelled to critically assess the larger strategic presumptions that animated each. This is especially essential if the stated campaigns did not work as intended. Yet no strategic assessment appears in their essay. Instead, we are offered a 'just-so' story that renders the authors preferred strategic vision as the only alternative. Ossification of strategy is a problem that has dogged socialist and communist formations for some time. If we do not account for our strategic presumptions, they may quickly harden into doctrinaire principles that are divorced from the material reality, the kind of which Lenin famously refuted.^[4]

In conveying these criticisms, my hope is that a wider debate about the organizational work within, and outside of, the EBDSA chapter may ensue.

A Critical Look at EBDSA Campaigns

Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown's essay mostly focuses on the Jovanka Beckles campaign,^[5] Proposition 10 for rent control,^[6] and the Oakland Teachers Strike.^[7] The authors praise these efforts as building the chapter, and for providing socialist-friendly information the public. Yet, the deeper meaning of these remains vague. Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown's piece lean on quantitative information—perhaps unintentionally stated as if they are 'deliverables'—so as to evidence the effectiveness of our chapter's work. Behind quantitative information—like

the essay's argument regarding how many people viewed EBDSA's online videos—are deeper, qualitative questions. What is the relationship between a person who views an EBDSA video online, and that person's organizational capacity and readiness to engage in struggle? Is the person who voted for Beckles in the primary now organized with many others within the broader working class? How do volunteer phone banks translate into lasting organizational power? Difficult questions like these are not found in the essay. In its place is a sustained acclaim for the chapter's work done thus far. It is certainly important to praise our collective efforts; there's no doubt that our chapter's political organization takes a lot of time, effort, and resolve. However, to rest on one's laurels is hardly the correct tool for deriving lessons from our actions. We must be able of being critical of what we have done so that we might not repeat the mistakes we have already made. In my view, such a critical look reveals significant problems with all of the EBDSA campaigns. It's from this critical view that lessons are had.

Oakland Public Teachers Strike. The teachers strike is treated by Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown as a historical success. They write: “It was a victory, if not a resounding one.”^[8] I am dismayed that the authors appear satisfied with what is, in reality, a troubling outcome that is not unrelated to the EBDSA's strategic choices. The tentative agreement that was narrowly approved was highly compromised. The three-year contract does not ensure against school closures beyond the first five months.^[9] What is perhaps more important is the contract's impact on class organization in the long-term. On this topic, the contract appears detrimental because it potentially frays intra-class alliances. First, between local union workers, as OEA wage increases came at the expense of classified union workers.^[10] Second, between parent-students and the teachers, as popular student services and afterschool programs in response to OEA wage increases.^[11] Both of these

problems were known in advance, well before the contract was voted on. It was for these reasons that the proposed contract faced stiff opposition by dissident OEA members. Yet, the EBDSA chapter did not effectively work against the contract by way of supporting the dissident teachers. Nor did the EBDSA widely promote that its premiere mutual-aid program—Bread for Ed—would continue alongside a protracted strike. This all signals a deep strategic blunder. To make this clear, it is necessary to briefly narrativize the strike.

Set against the wider educational strike-wave, the Oakland strike was well-footed and highly popular. Students, some charter teachers, parents, informal left groups, formal leftist organizations and unaffiliated community members all coalesced in a way that strengthened practically all of the OEA's picket lines. The strike's power was also bolstered by the Bread for Ed mutual-aid initiative, which provided school lunches for students who relied on district-provided food. Here, credit is due to the EBDSA and the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO) for building and facilitating the program.^[12] The Bread for Ed program was important because it materially reinforced the idea that the strike was about wider community concerns. Thus, the reactionary description of the strike as harmful for precarious students, especially students of color, was short circuited. Furthermore, the Bread for Ed program brought an awareness of, and trust between, OEA strikers and local socialist organizations. This latter aspect was important because it granted EBDSA some potential legitimacy in supporting leftward dissident teachers. However, as we will see, this potential was squandered.

Remarkably, as soon as the strike began to catch an ever more militant stride, a deeply compromised tentative agreement (TA) was announced. After five days of very successful pickets, the TA was haphazardly announced in the midst of a real demonstration of force. Early evening on Friday, over 1,000

people picketed and barricaded a school site with the intention of blocking a school board meeting from convening. Strikers swarmed school board members, fashioned doors with locks, and in one case fought off a school board member's personal bodyguard. The participants exhibited a steeled resolve to carry the strike into the following week. Yet, the union leader's announcement of the TA produced immediate confusion and contestation among the OEA membership regarding the day's blockade and the tentative agreement. Was the union calling off the blockade? Was the strike over? And most importantly, were the school closures nixed? The TA was initially described as a no-concessions agreement, but as details flowed it became clear that the proposed contract paused closures for only 5 months, and that funding for other programs and services wasn't guaranteed. Many teachers who were facing closure were clearly angry and refused to leave. Classified employees associated with another union, who were there in full force supporting the blockade, were also incensed because the contract meant potential layoffs for them. In short, the TA was immediately contested by members within the OEA, and by key allies outside of it.

Outcome aside, there were strong strategic reasons for opposing the TA. The proposed contract compromised the relationships that empowered the strike to being with: between teachers and students, by funding wages with cuts to programs that students wanted; between teachers and classified employees, by funding wages through layoffs that affected another important local union; and, damningly, within the OEA membership itself, by allowing school closures to continue after a very brief moratorium. The strike thus had—and will likely continue to have—organizational and political implications well into the future.

Few will disagree that our strategic orientation must center on rebuilding durable class power, as an antidote to the dissolution of class organization wrenched from decades of

counter-revolution. Yet, proletarian power is not reducible to economic concessions. Proletarian power is instead a product of lasting social patterns—material capacities, organic solidarities, mass institutions and a collective sense of belonging—that are byproducts of class struggle. Understanding this, Marx argues in *The Communist Manifesto* that the task of communists is to advance the interests of the entire proletariat.^[13] Inasmuch as Marx's perspective rings true, socialist groups like the EBDSA had a responsibility to support dissident teachers whose active opposition to the contract pivoted on wider concerns of the class.

Certainly, struggle cannot be forced, but supporting a substantial group of dissident teachers is far from voluntarist. Four site representatives told me that the representative council (a rank-and-file council that coordinated strike activities)^[14] were largely against the contract. This was an uphill battle. Powerful entities stood against them. With significant pressure from leadership to accept the deal, and with no strong allies to counteract this institutional pressure, the 120-person site-rep council narrowly voted in favor of the TA by 3 votes. Eventually, the TA was accepted, but by a narrow margin: 42% voted against it.^[15] By contrast, 81% of the LA Teachers Union voted to ratify their contract.^[16] If dissident teachers had strong and well-organized allies, the strike might have continued.

The EBDSA was unable or unwilling to assist dissident teachers. Room to assist dissident teachers clearly existed. Instead, my chapter remained neutral. Neutrality is hardly possible under conditions of political contestation. As a former member has elsewhere argued, the terrain upon which the TA vote took place was far from neutral; the political pretensions of the strike—to challenge closures and characterization—were deeply unpopular with the union's state and national echelons.^[17] Practically every aspect of today's

bourgeois reality works against militant action: institutional pressures from national and state-wide bureaucracies that move locals to moderate their activity; the legal system's restriction of what strike's may address; the repressive apparatus of the state that haunts our collective actions with clubs and jailhouses; the deeply-felt social relations of property and ownership; and, the liberal sociality of comprise we are all embedded within. There's no neutrality in the class struggle. My chapter—the EBDSA—simply failed to act decisively.

Proposition 10 & Jovanka Beckles. The campaign for proposition 10 resulted in significant demobilization and did not establish a base of organizational activity around housing after its electoral defeat. The East Bay is in the throes of an intense housing crisis, with surges in rental costs, homelessness and evictions.^[18] These tendencies make Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown's omission of the medium-term impact of the Proposition 10 campaign all the more troublesome.

Proposition 10 was a statewide ballot initiative that, if passed, would have allowed municipalities to set up their own rent control measures. The bulk of the EBDSA's Proposition 10 activity consisted of canvassing, often alongside organizations like Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment. Here, door-knockers implored persons to vote for the measure. The most obvious, but superficial, problem with the campaign is that it failed. Proposition 10 lost, with nearly 60% against it.^[19] More importantly, the campaign did not build independent organization outside of the election itself. This is because the campaign was manifestly electoral rather than housing-based. Proposition 10 canvassers were not attempting to forget long-term links with tenants. Long-term links could have been accomplished in a number of ways. For example, canvassers could have included inquiries regarding the tenancy-related problems of those they interfaced with. This could have been the basis of medium to long-term

building-level housing organizing. Instead, the passing of the election season washed away the campaign's basis for existing.

Proposition 10's ultimate demise is not what is important here—winning is not always key—what's key is what we get out of losing, and what takes root beyond the loss. The Proposition 10 campaign did not adequately organize working class people in a manner that could outlast the electoral season. Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown argue that many conversations about housing occurred through the campaign effort. Yet, materially speaking, the EBDSA is left with very little to show after Proposition 10's defeat.

Although the content of the Beckles campaign is different than Proposition 10, its form was very similar. Beckles—who is a member of the Richmond Progressive Alliance—challenged neoliberal Democrat Buffy Wicks for the California Assembly 15th district seat, which covers the cities of Berkeley, Emeryville and Richmond. This campaign was an uphill battle, as Wick's held a significant advantage fiscally, and also by way of support of her campaign by prestigious persons like Barack Obama.^[20] Yet, what is important here is not the act of "winning," but rather the production of organized class power that comes about in the campaign's process. Unfortunately, Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown's accounting does not specify what material organization did outlast this campaign, likely because the campaign did not have a lasting organizational impact.

Similar to Proposition 10, the most obvious problem with the campaign is that it ultimately failed. Ultimately, Wicks defeated Beckles with 56% of the vote.^[21] The campaign's less facile problem is its lack of enduring organizational capacity beyond the electoral season. Strikingly, since the close of the campaign, practically no EBDSA organizing efforts have taken place in Emeryville and Richmond. Additionally, it does not appear at all evident that socialist activity has been

augmented by the Beckles campaign in Berkeley, as a vast majority of our chapter's activity still takes place in the city of Oakland.^[22] The closure of the campaign season was, in a sense, final—it did not produce any meaningful material or organizational change for the chapter or the class.

CA Single Payer: The 'Forgotten' Original Campaign. Sometimes what has been forgotten is more telling than the easily recalled. Such is the case with the EBDSA's long-lost 2017 campaign for single payer in California (SB 562). What makes the SB 562 campaign striking is not merely that its failure has never been accounted for, but that its operational form^[23] has been replicated in the official DSA Medicare for All organizing document^[24] that was written by many of the same people. According to the EBDSA's website, in 2017 many canvassers were trained to knock on doors and discuss the policy.^[25] Like the Proposition 10 efforts and the Beckles campaign, the SB 562 campaign sought to educate voters who, in turn, would pressure their representatives to move on legislation. Despite its being in one of the "bluest" states in the US, SB 562 was shelved by a Democratic assembly person.^[26] I was a new member at that time, but it was obvious that the chapter had no meaningful mechanisms for pressuring the state. The campaign had not built the class's capacity to engage in coercive action. What was needed then was an openness to reassess strategic parameters. But a reassessment did not take place. Rather than interrogating a presumed theory of power, it appears that this strategic view has become elevated from the state-level to the national stage.

The California Single-Payer effort are like the Beckles and Proposition 10 campaigns in that they resulted in obtaining volunteer's information and spread awareness of a set of policy positions. Speaking of Proposition 10 and the Beckles campaign, Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown imply that the important outcomes were that contact made with volunteers, and that

consciousness was raised. For them, a key lesson is that the chapter needed to learn to communicate more widely. They tell us this: “we had barely begun to make full use of social media, textbanking, and transit station canvassing to reach a bigger audience.”^[27] Propaganda certainly has an important role to play. However, propaganda is not sufficient for solidifying class consciousness, let alone producing class organization. The most important element for building class power are the socially-functional relationships built between groups of people as they continue to act together over time.^[28] This is why workplace organizing has often become a central part of communist and socialist organizing—workplace organizing leverages the fact that proletarian subjects are forced to work alongside one another almost every day. Another example is the neighborhood and building-level organizing done by groups like the LA Tenants Union, among others.^[29] Or we may look to the history of class organization; for example, the sharecroppers union, which was built by the 1930s Communist Party USA.^[30] Checking a box in a booth or volunteering during an election cycle both end in participants returning to their private life, believing, as it were, that the political deed has been done. Unfortunately, this strategic dynamic hardly augments the organizational and political capacities of our class to become a historical agent.

Herein lies a strategic quagmire. At its core is the idea that actually-existing “democratic institutions” are sufficient for building socialist organization. All evidence appears to make a different case.

Critically Assessing Strategic Presumptions

Behind these faltering campaigns is a larger strategic vision, with a particular ideal of what political power is. To “fix” the EBDSA also means to rethink some of the core strategic assertions that have animated the EBDSA chapter for nearly two

years.

EBDSA's three electoral campaigns were centered on a specific vision of how to do politics. What the Proposition 10, Jovanka Beckles and the SB540 campaigns share is the presupposition that organized voter blocs can make effective demands through the state's electoral organs. All orient towards an electoral issue, and then deploy canvassing groups whose objective is to compel people to vote in the EBDSA's favor. Beyond getting out the vote, canvassing is said to raise consciousness and awareness of alternative policies and candidates that relate to socialism. This orientation contradicts the view—well accepted, even among liberal political scientists—that the U.S.'s democratic institutions are deeply anti-democratic.^[31] The electoral organ of the state, and its ideology of "representation" couldn't be farther from true; as it stands, the electoral state is the product of decades of counter-revolutionary tinkering to prevent leftward changes from happening.

This misinterpretation of liberal democratic mechanisms under the capitalist state as somehow neutral—perhaps similar to what Nicos Poulantzas called "power fetishism"^[32]—is the root problem of the EBDSA's campaigns thus far. Poulantzas argues that individuals who are not forced to regularly encounter the state's repressive apparatus often believe that the state is a neutral force that can arbitrate between groups with different interests. While the rhetoric of my chapter appears to align with Poulantzas, the structure of our campaigns does not. Each campaign has taken for granted the "democratic" story that the capitalist state provides us: that real representative mechanisms are in place that can transmit popular desires into actionable policy. This thinking "naturalizes" the electoral sphere, despite that this sphere is predicated on ensuring capitalist domination.

A similar form of fetishism is implied with regards to the

Oakland Teachers Strike. Here, the EBDSA's discourse of "neutrality" out of "respect for union democracy" see today's union structures as neutral. Yet, this entire view is founded on a faulty perception for how the internal "democratic" mechanisms of today's union's actually work. It's a view that demonstrates misunderstanding for how today's institutionalized, bureaucratic union formations tend to pressure members to act conservatively. Taking undue risks—like making demands that are beyond the scope of negotiations, like ending charterization—is a significant risk for those who inhabit the greater union's institutional and bureaucratic layers. It is not difficult to imagine the institutional pressure, from the California Teachers Association and the National Education Association, who want to avoid a potentially illegal strike. These are the conditions that produce "business unionism," rather than a handful of bad union officials occupying leadership posts. What is important is the historical form that many contemporary unions have grown into—largely depoliticized legalistic and bureaucratic institutions.^[33] No local—however reformed—is entirely free from these historic shifts.

What is needed, from a broad perspective, are independent bases of power from which socialist organization can stage itself. Today's working class is highly unorganized. Most are not part of unions. A great many of the U.S. proletarians do not vote, either. If we are going to organize them—locally, even—we need to have a sufficient plan takes the real limits to the electoral system and union structures seriously.

Conclusions

When it comes to strategic orientation, the stakes are high. Yet another U.S. presidential election looms. Whatever the outcome, a sound strategy will ensure that the end of the election season does not preclude enduring working-class organization. The electoral campaign of Bernie Sanders may

have added some dynamism to the Democratic Socialists of America, but as with most spurts of vitality, it also contains an inherent barrier to the course of socialist political development. Here, the electoral endeavors that my chapter has engaged in are deeply instructive for outlining the contours of this barrier. By consistently speeding headlong into very similar campaigns, the DSA risks the perennial leftist problem of organizational sclerosis. This may be avoided, but only if we are willing to critically reassess our work.

Amidst our turbulent moment is room for maneuver and space for political growth. But we can't treat this opportunity mechanistically. The outcome of our actions, from how to organize daily, to the tactics we deploy, are all subject to intense contingency and they must be evaluated on this basis. The U.S. socialist and communist left has been insignificant for some time. Yet, the growth of the DSA suggests that we may have been down, but not out. If we are to build a working-class movement that outlasts this political sequence, we must become willing and able to change our strategic course.

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[2] Julia McEvoy, "Oakland's School Closure Plans Off to a Rough Start for Some Parents," KQED, January 10, 2019, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11716967/oaklands-school-closure-plans-off-to-a-rough-start-for-some-parents>.

[3] Matthew Green and Vanessa Rancaño, "A Day After Teachers Strike Ends, Oakland School Board Approves Nearly \$22 Million in Cuts," KQED, March 5, 2019, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11730554/one-day-after-teachers-strike-ends-oakland-school-board-approves-nearly-22-million-in-cuts>.

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[5] “Elect Jovanka Beckles for State Assembly,” accessed May 16, 2019, <https://www.eastbaydsa.org/campaigns/electoral/>.

[6] “DSA Endorses California’s Proposition 10,” Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), October 2018, <https://www.dsausa.org/news/dsa-endorses-california-proposition-10/>.

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[8] [Abigail Gutmann-Gonzalez and Keith Brower Brown, “Lessons from the East Bay,” *The Call*\(blog\), May 14, 2019, https://socialistcall.com/2019/05/14/lessons-from-the-east-bay/](#).

[9] [“After Seven-Day Strike, Oakland Teachers Approve New Contract | EdSource,” accessed May 17, 2019, https://edsources.org/2019/tentative-agreement-reached-in-oakland-unified-teachers-strike/609342; “Oakland Education Association and Oakland Unified School District TENTATIVE AGREEMENT 2018-2021” \(Oakland Educational Association and the Oakland Schoolboard, March 1, 2019\), 2018–21, https://oaklandea.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/OEA-Tentative-Agreement-with-OUSD-March-1-2019-2.pdf](#).

[10] [Wyatt Kroopf, “Oakland Unified School District Plans to Eliminate 100 Classified Workers’ Positions,” Oakland North, accessed May 17, 2019, https://oaklandnorth.net/2019/04/24/ousd-plans-to-eliminate-10](#)

[0-classified-workers-positions/](#).

[11] When the TA was announced, I sat in on a student-teacher discussion about the contract. Students were immediately concerned and upset with the prospect of these programs being cut. When the TA was accepted, hundreds of students posted angry messages on OEA's social media posts.

[12] ["Bread for Ed," East Bay DSA Democratic Socialists of America, accessed April 19, 2019, https://www.eastbaydsa.org/campaigns/bread-for-ed/](#).

[13] [Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, Pbk. ed \(London: Verso, 2012\)](#).

[14] [Daniel Roland, "Did the Teachers Win? • Commune," *Commune* \(blog\), March 8, 2019, https://communemag.com/did-the-teachers-win/; "Site Reps," *Oakland Education Association*\(blog\), accessed May 17, 2019, https://oaklandea.org/site-reps/](#).

[15] ["Oakland Education Association Members Voted to Ratify Our Contract," *Oakland Education Association* \(blog\), accessed May 16, 2019, https://oaklandea.org/updates/oakland-education-association-members-voted-to-ratify-our-contract/](#).

[16] ["Members Pass TA | UTLA," accessed May 16, 2019, https://www.utla.net/news/members-pass-ta](#).

[17] [Jack Gerson, "Oakland Teachers' Strike: Balance Sheet, Lessons, and What Next?," *New Politics*, accessed April 19, 2019, https://newpol.org/oakland-teachers-strike-balance-sheet-lessons-and-what-next/](#).

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(Anti-Eviction Mapping Project), accessed May 24, 2019, <https://antievictionmapd.maps.arcgis.com/apps/StorytellingSwipe/index.html?appid=d70c5b933be04c669bde2c1df6fc8266>.

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[21] Guy Marzorati, "Buffy Wicks Defeats Jovanka Beckles in East Bay Assembly Race," *KQED*, November 7, 2018, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11702200/buffy-wicks-opens-up-early-lead-over-jovanka-beckles-in-east-bay-assembly-race>.

[22] Since my joining in 2017, the geographic scope of our chapters work does not appear to have significantly altered. A quick count of the EBDSA's facebook events shows that a vast majority of events are held in specific areas of Oakland and some parts of Berkeley. Some events have taken place recently in Hayward (six out of 40+ in the last year). Unfortunately, many cities in the East Bay appear to have no EBDSA presence to date.

[23] "Single-Payer Campaign Kickoff: Building Power to Win Big," *March* 1, 2017, <https://www.eastbaydsa.org/news/2017/2/27/single-payer-campaign-kickoff/>.

[24] "Launching a Medicare for All Campaign: A DSA Organizing Guide," accessed May 16, 2019, <https://medicareforall.dsausa.org>.

[25] "Single-Payer Healthcare," accessed May 16, 2019, <https://www.eastbaydsa.org/campaigns/healthcare/>.

[26] Melanie Mason, "California Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon Shelves Single-Payer Healthcare Bill, Calling It 'Woefully Incomplete,'" *latimes.com*, accessed May 16, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-sac-single-payer-shelved-20170623-story.html>.

[27] [Gutmann-Gonzalez and Brown, "Lessons from the East Bay."](#)

[28] See, for example, Thompson's Marxist history on how the English proletariat built itself into a class that could act in its own interest. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966).

[29] Armando Aparicio and David Zlutnick, "These Tenants Are Leading the Largest Rent Strike in LA History," August 20, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/these-tenants-are-leading-the-largest-rent-strike-in-la-history/>.

[30] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*, The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

[31] [Yascha Mounk, "America Is Not a Democracy," *The Atlantic*, March 2018,](#) <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/03/america-is-not-a-democracy/550931/>.

[32] Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, 2nd edition (London: Verso, 1982).

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