

The Necessity of Organizing DSA Members as Workers

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Christian Smalls, founder of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), second left, and worker-organizers celebrate outside the National Labor Relations Board offices in the Brooklyn, New York on April 1, 2022.

Author's note: This is a discussion piece about labor strategy in DSA but has value as part of the discussion that needs to take place in the labor left and the broader left in general regarding the labor movement, its very necessary revitalization, and the role of leftists. The author invites responses and hopes that this is merely the first in a more sustained, critical examination of the present labor movement and the left's strategy within it.

With the elections of the third Steering Committee of the Democratic Socialists Labor Commission (DSLCL) a few months ago, the Democratic Socialists of America's (DSA) national labor body has entered its fifth year with much on its plate. DSA's most recent national convention in August 2021 passed Resolution #5, "Building Worker Power to Win Democratic Socialism: A Labor Strategy for DSA in 2021-2023," committing the organization to a range of labor-oriented projects from passing the PRO Act and organizing Amazon to transforming unions and connecting members through worker networks. While the approach taken in the resolution leaves necessary space open for experimenting in implementation, and valid criticism notwithstanding about the lack of prioritization within it, what it shows is that the organization is still grappling with the best way to go forward with its labor strategy - that is, where to start, in what proportions, and why?

It is hardly a light assignment charged to this new generation of socialists who face the not

insignificant task of helping to revitalize a moribund labor movement by overcoming the objective and subjective obstacles workers currently face in battling their bosses and the capitalist class. Currently, most of those debating DSA's labor strategy seem to talk past each other, focusing on tactics removed from material organizational conditions, with little regard to how to tie them together and implement them in a unified actionable strategy. Other more formal elaborations of labor strategy by the organization such as the Rank-and-File Strategy pamphlet recently published by the DSLC also fail to connect the assortment of tactics put forward or to prioritize them. It should be said that the pamphlet is a positive development for DSA with many merits as an introduction to the strategy. But on accounts of the Rank-and-File Strategy itself, it omits the core element of why being in and orienting to the rank-and-file in unions is essential for socialists, eliding the distinction between union officers and rank-and-file leaders in the process.

Along with the paramount question of how to revitalize the labor movement, other key questions that must be answered are: Why revitalization? What is the role of socialists in that revitalization? How can we better connect the socialist movement to struggles in the workplace and the labor movement? And how do we better build a socialist base in the working class? Still, those questions sit on the level of the near-abstract. To answer those, we must also more concretely ask how we build members' experience, capacity, and leadership in the labor movement: How do we recruit from it? How do we develop organized currents among both class struggle unionists and as socialists, in workplaces, unions, and industries? How do we develop material political analyses of those various realms so that we might address their particular problems from a socialist perspective; and how do we do this in a sustainable, reproducible, scalable way?

A primary vehicle for answering these questions and accomplishing these tasks are workers' circles. These currently go by a variety of names in DSA such as "industry network," "industry group," or "labor circle," their functions and activity varying, existing in chapters, whether Los Angeles, East Bay, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Detroit, New York City, or Boston. While the concept is still in its infancy in this organization, it is hardly new to the history of the Left. Work-based socialist organizations of the past allowed for socialists to form and cultivate concrete, collective material expressions of their politics by engaging in grounded day-to-day organizing in their own workplaces, which enabled the creation of a rooted base for those politics and the collectives based on those politics. At present, this type of organization allows for the development of both class struggle and socialist politics through the rebuilding of a militant minority which can merge the socialist and labor movements organically from within, spurring on and leading the drive for the revitalization of the labor movement. Moreover, such organization, when animated by bottom-up class struggle and socialist politics, creates the conditions and capacity for DSA to address several vital organizational issues it faces while tying together various tactics in its labor work into a cohesive strategic whole to carry out and refine.

Historical Work-Based Organization

Perhaps the most historically well-known occurrence of work-based organization is the Communist Party's "shop units" and fractions from the 1920s through the early 1940s and it's no accident that one of the influential guides for Amazon workers organizing in the Amazon Labor Union was written in that period by a Communist Party leader. Shop units were organizations of the party that consisted of three or more Communists (though usually around ten) working at the same worksite, engaged in spreading the program of the party, developing and broadening a group of coworkers sympathetic to Communist politics, and encouraging militant industrial unionism. Their base of activity was the workplace. They distributed the party's national daily paper, recruited workers to the party, put on educationals, organized around particular workplace grievances, and put out short, simple, and direct workplace newspapers that focused on the working conditions they and their coworkers faced but also included larger political issues that went beyond the scope of the workers'

immediate grievances and unionism. In a time with intense political repression, shop units faced many difficulties such as isolation, demoralization, and inactivity, but also served as the scaffolding for organizing committees ready to spring to life in the upsurge of a union drive, and they developed credible, experienced organizers and leaders with answers to the pressing problems workers faced in the workplace and their unions. The skeletal organization and the developed leaders laid the groundwork for the networks that brought the CIO to life.

Fractions, though similar to shop units, were considered independent of the formal party organization and acted as caucuses of party members within unions and their various apparatuses (executive boards, committees, councils, etc). Their base of activity was the union, though it frequently carried over into the workplace. Fractions caucused before union meetings to work out objectives, strategy, and goals to be presented. They also discussed and decided how to apply party policies to the union, thereby developing Communist positions on concrete union issues such as officer elections, union structure, and union programs. In addition to this, fractions deliberated on how to improve the working conditions of union members, how to introduce party campaigns into the union, how to recruit workers from the union to the party, and how to increase the readership of the party's national daily paper within the union. Oftentimes, the functions of the shop unit and the fraction merged with the unit effectively also operating as a fraction. Though both shop units and fractions attempted to popularize Communist ideas, their secrecy amongst their coworkers, sectarianism towards other Left groups, and substantive errors in political direction and methods often limited their gains.

In the late 1960s and 1970s with the New Left's radicalization and "turn to industry," socialist organizations like the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and many with New Communist Movement and third-camp socialist roots further developed the shop unit and fraction, if not in name, then in practice, into the "struggle group." The struggle group was an organization established in the workplace and union, guided by a program based on the circumstances of the particular site of organizing. The organization was active in the immediate struggles of both workplace and union, but went beyond the two to engage in, draw in, and attempt to link non- or less-directly related struggles, such as the antiwar and Black liberation movements, to their own work-based site of organizing. These groups were intended to be class organizations in the sense that those who were not from the parenting socialist organization could and should be a part of them. It was expected though that members of the parent socialist organization would play a key role in forming the struggle group and maintaining leadership positions in it. In practice, the struggle groups functioned along a spectrum from front groups to caucuses. Their goals were broader or narrower, changing over time, and the groups included sometimes more, sometimes fewer workers, according to the particular parenting socialist organization in question. Many groups that purported to be mass organizations were in reality narrow groups that didn't collaborate with other socialist groups whose leftist members maintained control in an undemocratic fashion.

A complete accounting of these and other historical work-based organizations is beyond the scope of this article. However, strengths, weaknesses, and differences aside, what unites these three forms of work-based organization is that they allowed the socialists of the time to deal concretely and collectively with the particular, immediate issues of the spaces they organized in, enabling them to develop and spread concrete manifestations of their politics that were practical and felt by the community of interest in which they organized while also acquiring hard organizing skills, forming deep relationships with a diversity of workers, and cultivating their leadership capacities. By forming organization based on the workplace and union, these radicals recognized that the day-to-day conditions and needs of workers must be the basis of any socialist organizing and that the immediacy of these conditions and needs tends to be the only force galvanizing enough to get workers to push through apathy, fear, cynicism, and hopelessness to act, to take up collective

struggle, engendering a sense of agency and power in their lives. At its core, this meant socialists as workers acting as primary agents of change in their own lives and in larger society, not simply active or passive supporters of the struggles of worker “others.” Furthermore, by creating organization based on where workers spend their daily lives, the socialist organization could be brought into the daily lives of the socialist organization’s own members, increasing their involvement and commitment to the organization by decreasing the gap between one’s daily individual activity and that of the organization. For unionists, if they were to be active socialists, this also meant overlapping the work required to organize in two different institutions – the workplace / union and the socialist organization – thereby decreasing the difficulty of involvement in both. While it’s easy to gloss over, work-based organization allowed the basic units of these socialist organizations to be defined through the work their members did in their workplaces. If the power of workers and the working class rests on our ability to stop the creation of surplus value at the point of production, then this is something socialists should not lightly pass over.

From the Bottom Up and Inside Out

A workers’ circle, then, is a group of DSA members organized on the basis of the work they do for a living, or in other words, based on their potential power as workers. Workers’ circles can be organized according to workplace, employer, union, industry, or sector, organizing in and across workplaces and unions. Though the particular scope and content of a workers’ circle is dependent on the unique circumstances its participants find themselves in, we can see that organization based on work is essential to socialist organizing, especially if we want to organize as socialists at work.

Underlying the organizational concept is an analysis of the history of the labor movement in the U.S., which, with the exception of the brief resurgence of the Left in labor in the 1960s and 1970s, has been mostly separated since the post-World War II due to the McCarthy era purges and organized labor’s integration into the Democratic Party, accompanied by the overall decline of socialist organization over the past 50 years. This analysis recognizes that in the past, a key element that has made unions into fighting, democratic organizations able to push past the limits and pressures imposed by capitalism was the presence of organized, experienced, politically developed militant radicals organizing, as part of a larger militant minority, on the shopfloor and extending outward. If one of our chief goals as socialists advancing the socialist project is to revitalize the labor movement – not only to aid in the improvement of workers’ immediate conditions but to midwife working class formation that can effectively fight capitalist exploitation and oppression, serving as a catalyst and base to develop a comprehensive, explicit class political movement that fights for working-class political, economic, and social transformation – then socialists must seek to reunite the socialist and labor movements by helping to rebuild a militant minority within the latter that can develop a class struggle current and a socialist pole of attraction within it.

For this reunification to occur organically and effectively, it must occur primarily in a bottom-up manner, from the inside out with socialists, either existing or newly-won, as active first-person participants in organized labor and the labor movement, not from the outside in. To do that means encouraging worker-members to organize in their workplaces and unions, and supporting them in doing so by providing them tools and resources including organizational space for political, strategic, and tactical discussions, training, and education as well as facilitating worker-member to worker-member connections.

The reason it must occur from the bottom up and inside out is that there are strong forces and pressures on unions as institutions and their leaderships that, without a strong organized rank-and-file to exert a more dominant counterpressure, inhibit the union leadership’s ability to develop the consciousness, combativity, and confidence of the workers they represent and without which transformative gains are not possible. These pressures stem not just from the employers themselves,

but from capital's controlling influence on the government, the political parties, the courts, and the economy, all of which are channeled onto the union leadership and the staff they hire, as the representatives of the union, or what's often called the union officialdom. The potential and real punitive measures these entities dispense range from anti-labor legislation, fines, injunctions, and jailing to backdoor political horse trading, capital flight, and economic depression. Generally, these measures keep the union and its leadership in line. However, pressures and incentives also arise from the distinct material interests that provide the basis for the distinct social layer of the union officialdom. Though leadership in lots of instances comes from the ranks (and should), once in leadership the worker is no longer in the same social position. The worker, now a union official, becomes responsible for the maintenance and reproduction of the union as an institution - their life, livelihood, and a sustainable career attached to its continued life - often succumbing to institutional conservatism which puts the interests of the union organization above the interests of the workers it represents. In addition to this, the extent to which the leadership no longer work in the workplace, no longer depend on wages directly from the employer for their survival, no longer are directly in touch with (and hence pressured by) the rank-and-file members, and no longer have the same standard of living, social status, and social relations as those of the average member, rising above them, is the extent to which the leadership's material incentives and interests tend to separate from the workers they represent. Of course, union officials must deliver some minimal conditions, wages, and benefits in order to retain their positions - and this does not discount the commitment and dedication of many hardworking officers and staff to their members' betterment - but it is all of these immense pressures which make the rank-and-file of any union, new or old, the fundamental driver of change and which make a base in it a necessity for socialists.

All of this means there need to be strong, organized rank-and-file forces within the union that can mobilize for the workers' needs and that can keep their leadership accountable, able to push leaders out of the way if need be to act independently, if workers wish to counteract the pressure and influence of the employer and capital on their leadership, and diminish the latter's institutional conservatism. In this sense, the union officialdom as a social group is wedged between labor and capital, acting consciously or not as mediators between the two with whichever influence is stronger winning out. With organized labor heavily bureaucratized, heavily constricted by capitalist material pressures and ideology, unable to turn the tide of decades of degrading working and living conditions, workers' struggles against their bosses for better lives inevitably come into conflict with the operation of union officialdom which tends to preserve the status quo. It is the rank-and-file workers who bear the daily brunt of work intensification, short staffing, long hours, insecure scheduling, dehumanizing disciplinary measures, and declining real wages, and it is these conditions that eventually compel them to organize. As such, any socialist organization, or grouping of its members, whose main entry point or organizing position in organized labor is within union leadership and its staff will then be positioning itself in the same social layer that is most affected and conservatized by capitalist pressure, and therefore the least capable of revitalizing the labor movement. Without a healthy base of rank-and-file workers, the fate of the grouping of socialist workers then becomes tied to the fate of the union leaders and staff with which it is associated. As soon as the socialist workers fall out of favor with the union leadership, as soon as union leaders fall out of favor with their rank-and-file members, or as soon as the union leaders lose their formal leadership positions, so will the organizing of the socialist workers lose its influence or fall into disarray.

Insofar as the Rank-and-File Strategy concerns closing the physical-social gap between the socialist and labor movements as a means to close the breach in class and political consciousness between the two movements, existing socialists must be socially positioned primarily where the logic of class struggle has the most potential to be carried through and where the struggle will occur the most acutely. For the same reason that rank-and-file workers are the main drivers of change in unions and

that rank-and-file workers need independent internal organization in their union to keep their union true to the aggressive pursuit of worker and working class interests, socialist workers must keep their socialist organization likewise in the ranks and independent from the union apparatus and leadership if they are to help create a vibrant class struggle unionism. Crucially, by organizing as workers, the workers' circle allows for the possibility of the growth of a rooted working-class base in workplaces and unions best positioned to navigate and counteract the contradictory, conservatizing, and restraining pressures put on unions as institutions that undercut the advancement of working class struggle, organization, and consciousness - something necessary for any chance at labor revitalization.

Developing Class Struggle Practices and Socialist Politics

For socialist workers to find the workers' circle useful enough to allocate valuable hours of their life to its activity, it must be able to address the practical needs of organizing as socialists. The circle then is based on the understanding that being a unionist by itself does not equate to being a socialist and that being a socialist doesn't necessarily mean that one is well-equipped to organize in the workplace. If the latter were true, socialists would have a much wider base than they currently have within workplaces and unions. If the former were true, the labor movement and the AFL-CIO would look a lot different today.

While working in organizing committees and rank-and-file groupings is an essential condition of any work socialists undertake in workplaces and unions, that work by itself tells us little about what we should be doing as *socialist* unionists and how we should be doing it. How do we as socialists make the organizing committee or rank-and-file grouping as fully class struggle as possible? How should socialists relate to the NLRB in non-union and union workplaces? What are the conditions and preparations necessary to run a successful insurgent campaign that can transform a union? What are the unusual circumstances in which one would want to run as an isolated reform candidate without having built up some culture of rank-and-file initiative or a widely-backed platform to organize around? How should socialists pursue industrial unionism in the age of general unionism? What strategies and tactics do we use? What are the goals that we push for? How do we link to other movements and larger political struggles that may overlap with but that transcend the workplace and the union? Functionally and almost inevitably, there is also the question of how socialists in one group should relate to those in another when organizing in a workplace or union. There's a necessity to work out a developed socialist orientation to be able to answer these questions both in general and in particular circumstances which just working as a scattering of individuals doesn't tell us and that non-political worker organization can't provide by itself.

The other side to this is that workers' circles also present a potential ballast for DSA members as they make their way into the difficult world of workplace and union organizing. Without such a ballast in the specific contexts of our particular workplaces and unions, a higher potential danger exists of capsizing or unanchored drifting of our socialist politics, especially since the dominant ideology in any society is the ruling class' ideology, and business unionism and labor liberalism still reign supreme within organized labor. The issues of Covid safety measures and vaccines, the undemocratic nature of the US political system, the red- and race-baiting of the far right via Critical Race Theory hysteria and law-and-order politics, and the abolition or restriction of abortion rights have to be thought about and dealt with. Being a militant unionist does not inherently provide the basis for socialist solutions to those questions, and application of those solutions to particular arenas of organizing. Furthermore, in this political moment, with the threat to bourgeois democratic institutions from the conspiracy-driven Trumpist right, we leave the larger political terrain of contestation within the unions and the workplace open and susceptible to far right politics if we ignore developing and articulating a socialist politics in these settings while engaged in our unionist work. Undoubtedly, while the basis for an articulation of such a socialist politics, and the creation of

a base for them, should take place within a class struggle method of organizing focused on the immediate issues of the workplace and union, that method does not automatically translate to the creation of those politics and their longer term goals, but must be consciously undertaken. Workers' circles thus have the potential to keep us grounded in our socialist principles and politics, balancing them with the immediate needs and struggles of unionism.

Practically, the concept of the workers' circle acknowledges that to organize effectively, one must organize collectively as a group. Organizing as an individual or a collection of individuals can be a very isolating endeavor, prone to frustration and burnout. The development of organizing skills, the development of a socialist political perspective and strategy for any given domain of activity, the sharing of experiences, the providing of material and non-material aid, and the community of support that comes from all of that, and which is necessary to sustain long-term struggle, must actively be created. It cannot be done by organizing ourselves as socialists based on geography and residence, though those may be suitable characteristics for other non-work-based domains of organizing.

Hence, the workers' circle is a stimulant, a vehicle, and an aid for organizing as socialists in workplaces and unions, not a substitute or replacement for that work. Its overall purpose is to organically reconnect current socialists with organized labor and the labor movement, develop them as capable workplace organizers while also attracting new or burgeoning socialist workers to its sphere of activity and DSA as a larger organization, thereby helping to rebuild local militant minorities that can develop local class struggle currents, and socialist poles of attraction within them, within local labor movements that can eventually be connected regionally and nationally, and which can spur on the revitalization of that movement as a whole.

Addressing Working Class Diversity and Other Organizational Hurdles

As a part of DSA, workers' circles would allow the organization to address and remedy, at least partially, several concrete problems it faces generally, and also specifically, in its labor work: organizational composition, capacity, leadership development, and siloing.

Though both workplaces and unions still struggle with the discrimination of racism, sexism, transphobia, and xenophobia, they are some of the most diverse settings in the U.S., consisting of workers as a class, with union workplaces in particular being more materially equal for workers of color than non-union workplaces. In unions, Black workers are more likely to be union members than white workers and nearly four in ten union members are workers of color. Educationally, slightly more than half of union members have no bachelor's degree. By being organized around and anchored in work, DSA can better take steps to fix its lack of diversity within the working class, in regards to race and ethnicity, but also in regards to industry and job type. Being able to engage in organizing around the immediate conditions and needs of workers means engaging the vast majority of workers who are rightly cynical and alienated from elections and have a large number of competing demands for their time. Individuals are less likely to be motivated to spend time in activities they see as futile and out of their control, but they can be compelled and motivated to join in activities that can directly address their immediate needs and improve their immediate conditions. Work-based organization and activity thereby allows us to expand outward from the layers of the working class in which we have disproportionate representation and which tend to be better educated, better-off, and whiter. By expanding the diversity in one sphere of our activity, we can then be better positioned to expand diversity within our membership as a whole.

As mentioned above, those who want to be active in DSA and active in their workplaces and unions have double duty in terms of work and meetings. Organization based on work, while not eradicating the difference between the two sites of activity, overlaps them significantly, making it easier to

sustain worker-member involvement in DSA by increasing the incentive to remain involved since their involvement will be directly linked to the improvement of their immediate needs and conditions. The proximity between DSA organization and workplace-union organization also has the potential then to increase our capacity in specific ways such as the ability to conduct organizer trainings, political education, socials, solidarity support, and jobs programs. Worker-members have a direct self-interest and motivation to do these things because they are linked to the desire to better working terms and conditions in one's own field, and increase the democracy, and hence effectiveness, of one's union. What this means is that, while our overall experience and knowledge as an organization is generally low and undeveloped in the workplace, organized labor, and the labor movement, workers' circles offer the long-term organizational basis for developing those in a systematic, self-perpetuating manner. That also means more developed concrete bases in the workplace, strengthening our ties to workers and the working class while at the same time encouraging as wide a swath as possible of our members to think of themselves as workers. This last part bears emphasizing because many DSA members do not think of themselves as a worker or as part of the working class. Though a majority are working class as identified in organizational surveys and therefore part of the working class-in-itself, they have not yet become a part of the self-conscious class-for-itself that socialists strive to form.

Lastly, the synthesis of skills, experience, and political perspective required in the labor movement, and thereby in DSA's labor work, are all ultimately based on the experience of organizing in the workplace and in the union. With the long-term development of workers' circles whose activity is based on organizing in the workplace and union, an engine of leadership development with an active leadership pipeline, grounded in the labor movement, can better be created for DSA in this crucial terrain of struggle. Contributing to this leadership development, because the type of organization is based on and mirrors part of the structure of workers' daily lives, a more holistic approach to the whole complex of issues workers face - racism, sexism, immigration, environmental degradation to name a few - can be undertaken. Instead of DSA conducting its work primarily based on organization formed around issues abstracted from real life organic structures, it can take up each issue as it manifests itself concretely within the organic everyday institutions of the workplace and the union, grounding and tying together its various strains of work in a comprehensive manner.

Tying Tactics Together

Both on the national and local levels in DSA, core areas of DSA's labor work have included political labor education, strike and solidarity support, electoral and legislative campaigns, organizer development, jobs programs, and connecting DSA members through work-based networks. Each one of these is often listed next to each other on a laundry list of projects to implement with little to nothing yet written on how they might connect with each other and in which order they might be undertaken or prioritized, leaving it up to the smarts and discretion of individual members, chapters, or leadership bodies to figure out what they want to do. The unrecognized potential keystone that can hold together these core areas in a cogent whole, connecting into a political and organizational strategy, are the aforementioned work-based networks, or in other words, workers' circles.

Electoral and legislative campaigns (referred to hereafter as "parliamentary campaigns" for short) are the predominant form of DSA activity. Within a workplace and union context, these campaigns tend to do little to immediately address and solve workers' needs and problems, do little to build workplace organizing skills - skills motivated by a categorically different logic than electoral organizing - and are typically not able to address the political, organizational, and cultural obstacles within unions that create member apathy and cynicism, disrupt solidarity, and encourage top-down business unionist modes of functioning. Leaving aside the question of the desirability of taking up these parliamentary campaigns as socialists within the labor movement (there are times where these would make sense), on both the national and the chapter level, our organization has little or no

means to effectively and systematically push these within workplaces and unions. This leaves initiative up to isolated individuals in union locals, perhaps in the best circumstances an uncoordinated handful, with little support in assessing the viability of a particular campaign within their union or in applying the campaign to their union. Unmoored from a rank-and-file organizational expression, DSA, if it wishes to pursue such campaigns, cannot then push for the campaign organically via the needs and will of its dual members – those who are both members of DSA and of a given union – but must push for it artificially from the outside as an institution itself seeking the institution of the union via the latter’s leadership, in short, orienting this activity towards influencing union officialdom, the status quo historical orientation of DSA before its 2016 rebirth. Workers’ circles would allow parliamentary campaigns, when they do make sense, to be carried out in a more systematic, organized, bottom-up fashion.

Similarly, workers’ circles can add stability to jobs programs that chapters and their local labor formations may decide to take up. While there is still much confusion in DSA about the rank-and-file strategy, demonstrated by the conflation of a single tactic – getting jobs with the purpose of workplace organizing – with the strategy as a whole, proponents of jobs programs should recognize that this tactic is not effective as the central tactic of a labor strategy. It is important that as socialists we’re where there’s the most strategic potential for organizing and this tactic can help with that and has the potential to help address our compositional imbalance as an organization, but it can only do the latter if the worker-transplants stay organizationally linked to DSA in their organizing and the DSA-linked organizing they do is useful in addressing the needs of the worker-transplant, the needs of the greater workforce at a given employer, and the needs of the the greater membership in a given union. More significant than this though is that, based on this author’s experience in actively developing a jobs program in their own chapter, the tactic of the jobs program only tends to involve the 1% to 2% of DSA membership that wants or needs a new job, has skills and interest in jobs at one of the designated targets, wants to take the leap, potentially lifelong, into workplace and union organizing, and has all other obligations and everything else in their life align. If DSA helps members get jobs, the organization must also create support, training, and development structures for them, otherwise it runs the risk of isolating, overwhelming, and burning them out – a dominant critique featured in the “Socialists on the Job” panels that the DSLC put on last year of New Left industrializers reflecting on their socialist organizations’ experiences in the 1970s and 80s. Political education, organizer trainings, mentorship, a sense of community – the means of support that a worker dedicated to organizing in a new job would want – all of these are things that workers-members in a workers’ circle would provide out of their own collective self-interest in organizing and therefore would not have to be created from scratch. In situations where DSA doesn’t have an existing concentration of members in the employer, union, industry, or sector as the jobs program target, those with the new jobs there will likewise tend to be driven by their own individual and collective self-interest to create these support and organizing structures, first in smaller informal means and then, if the group grows, in a larger more formal manner. Non-union jobs program targets have to operate slightly differently, but the principle remains the same for them too. The organic endpoint if DSA wishes to keep its organizational ties to those who get new jobs and not see them wander off into the distance or burnout is workers’ circles.

All of the above organizing and support endeavors involved in workers’ circles also serve as a beacon of attraction for non-DSA militant worker reformers and socialists with whom we establish relationships through our strike and solidarity support, making possible the long-term consolidation of relationships formed in those activities and serving as a home for workers-as-workers within DSA. The question we must be asking ourselves is, “why would a worker want to be involved in DSA activity or join DSA – what do we have to offer them?” The answer that most would recognize is that a worker would get involved in or join DSA if they knew it could help them in their struggles, but we must specify further what this means.

If it just means showing up to support struggles from the outside, then the relationship the worker has with the organization will tend to be a more shallow, transactional one: you come out to support me, I'll come out for things to support you. In this relationship, DSA is viewed as an institution and as an "other," separate from the struggles of the worker with little organic connection between the two. If DSA can only provide support for the irregular, big explosions of struggle and the like - which is of course a crucial and important activity - then that is what workers will seek it out for once every three to five years for the duration of their contract-related action before retreating back to their union. If, however, on the other hand, helping workers in their fights means being involved in the daily struggles of the worker, acting as a vehicle and aid for the waging and winning of those struggles, then the relationship the worker has with the organization will be a more personal, transformational one. In this relationship, DSA is viewed from the bottom-up through its worker-members and as a critical, organic part of the worker's struggles. If DSA can provide support, resources, and community for the day-to-day struggle, acting as an instrument for its development, then workers will seek it out for exactly this, for it is that day-to-day struggle that is the most immediate and the most difficult to navigate as it involves hundreds of concrete mundane actions, events, and decisions that add up to and shape the course of the larger manifestations of struggle as seen in strikes.

Through workers' circles, DSA can be a vehicle for the development of workers' daily struggles. With the same motivation that underscores the drive to get support in these struggles is the drive to connect with others like one's self in the same employer, industry, or union who are also in struggle or want to be. Once again, the motivation is self-interest: workers want to meet those who they can organize with to better their job and union; they want to meet others who are in the same boat from whom they can get ideas, information, resources, and the support of comradeship; they want to meet those who have already been through battles so they can get advice on maneuvering, tactics, and strategy. Through direct, material self-interest, there's a motivation to support other workers in one's industry, union, and employer, not only because individuals are more likely to help those with whom they identify, but because of how the supported workers do in their struggle against their employer determines what sort of pressure, upward or downward, is imposed on their own working terms and conditions, and shapes the strength and quality of the politics and practices of their shared union, adjacent unions, and the local labor movement,

The workers' circle is thus the organizational basis for uniting jobs programs, solidarity support, new member recruitment, political labor education, organizer development, and parliamentary campaigns while developing experience, leadership, and class struggle politics as organic actors in the struggle with skin in the game, affected first-hand by both victories and losses. Through involvement in workers' immediate everyday struggles from the first-hand perspective as workers and animated by a bottom-up, rank-and-file, class struggle politics, it is also the organizational basis on which DSA can fix its compositional imbalance and artificial siloing, and develop its capacity and member leadership. Workers' circles even present the potential, albeit in embryonic form, for moving towards developing a basic unit of organization within DSA based on work. With its activity driven by the desire for help and support in the striving of its worker participants to improve their working conditions and unions, it has the material basis on which to sustain, reproduce, develop, and expand itself, a class struggle current, and a socialist pole of attraction within the labor movement.

If workers' circles are not undertaken in a systematic, collective manner across the organization, DSA can still play a valuable role as a basic entry point to socialist ideas and the progressive wing of the labor movement which includes a tiny minority that are endeavoring to put into practice class struggle unionism toward the ends of working class emancipation. However, its role will end there as it will be unable to develop and provide the masses of workers - not from the outside and top-

down but from the inside and bottom-up - with the particular, concrete ideas, strategies, methods, and support they need to overcome the problems and stagnancy of current worker organization in surmounting capitalist influence of unions through labor officialdom, state regulation, legalism, ideological hegemony, political parties, and the organization of labor processes that favor capital. These must be addressed in order for workers to have collective rank-and-file control over their unions, to have unions that will unflaggingly fight for their members and workers everywhere, and to create new unions where none exists that can win transformative changes in the lives of its members and other workers. Workers' circles with class struggle and socialist politics allow us the opportunity to develop responses to the tough questions of the labor movement in our time. We have a long, steep path before us, and we can start to climb it, but only if we take up as a priority with full support and full resources the project of workers' circles in and across every chapter of DSA.