

# Organizing for Justice

A DSA Resource for  
Effective Community  
Organizing



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# PART ONE: THIS IS DSA

## Welcome to the Democratic Socialists of America!

**T**he Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is the largest socialist organization in the United States, and the principal U.S. affiliate of the Socialist International. DSA's members are building progressive movements for social change while establishing an openly socialist presence in American communities and politics.

As democratic socialists, we share a profound belief that a better world is possible. We are committed to working towards greater economic and social justice so that the needs of everyone can be met, as opposed to the further enrichment of a privileged few. In order to achieve a truly just and democratic society in which ordinary people assume control over their own lives, the economy and many government institutions must be radically transformed. Only by joining together in collective action are we able to bring about the progressive changes our world so desperately needs. Activists who share our commitment to the ideals of democratic socialism have a vital role to play in building these movements for change.



Since our founding through a merger in 1983 of the New American Movement and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee founded by Michael Harrington, DSA and our youth group, Young Democratic Socialists (YDS), have played a principled role in struggles for social and economic justice and throughout the world – fighting

for change in our communities, on our campuses, at the ballot box and beyond, often in coalitions with the labor movement and the movements for environmental sustainability, immigrant rights, civil rights, women's rights, and the rights of gay, lesbian and transgender people.

Here are some things that differentiate DSA from other activist groups:

1. We do multi-issue organizing, which helps draw the connection between different forms of oppression. But, we go beyond that;
2. We name the system (capitalism) as part of a broader analysis of power relations and structures of oppression, unlike many multi-issue groups;
3. We take both electoral politics and other grassroots organizing seriously. We can improve people's lives now, rather than throwing ourselves against the entire capitalist system ineffectually; and we can make a profound impact on the way power politics operate when we get out the vote for candidates (especially at the local level!) who really share our dreams. There is no telling what a grassroots, mass movement of ordinary people around socialist ideals could accomplish if we could move our dreams and analysis from the fringe to an arena with more impact – without of course abandoning our independence.
4. We have a very democratic structure and encourage debate and discussion, rather than forcing adherence to a particular viewpoint or "party line." You are expected to follow your own conscience.
5. Finally, related to the previous points, we unite theory and practice – we both struggle in the streets and develop our socialist ideas and educate each other through discussion.

## **PART TWO:** **ORGANIZING A DSA LOCAL** **ONE | Getting Started**

The Midwest Academy says that organizing is “overwhelmingly about personal relationships...the relationships organizers develop are their most important source and forming relationships their most important talent.” Forming a DSA local is about building bonds of mutual trust with other people committed to social justice. The comrades you develop through DSA will constantly inspire and empower you, not to mention help sustain you in the struggle for a better world.

When you approach someone – be they a friend, an acquaintance, or a sympathetic stranger – about becoming involved with DSA (or for that matter about any issue on which you want them to take action) there are a few guidelines you should keep in mind. Not only will these help develop your relationship with folks, it’ll help you understand their motivations and the issues they care about. Structuring a “one-on-one” conversation and following a few simple steps will greatly help you locate a community of comrades and allies. Notice: to be effective, you must listen just as much as you talk!

**Start** the conversation: sound confident, be reasonable and considerate. Talk about when you realized you were a democratic socialist.

**Get them talking**, then practice active listening: what kinds of issues are they interested in? What makes them question the dominant ideology? When did they realize they wanted to do something to change things? Get them talking about themselves.

**Educate and “agitate”**: provide information about DSA, our goals, and what you’d like to do that would address some of the issues that they mentioned as motivating them. Talk about why it’s important for them to get involved.

**Assess** their support: can you tell if they’re intrigued or scared? Ask them straight up: will you help me start a DSA local? (or will you help plan a labor solidarity campaign? or will you come to this public forum or demonstration? etc.).

**Move them** to action and get a commitment: if they say they will help out in some way, ask them to take a specific action. Take into consideration their time constraints and skills, and make your “ask” big or small accordingly. Then offer an alternative (attending a local planning meeting, attending an event, putting up posters, etc.). How much time can they give to DSA? What other resources can they offer?

**Persist** in talking to another person, and another; you may need to talk to dozens of people to find five who really want to organize a local.

**See PART SIX: GETTING THE WORD OUT: ONE**  
Recruiting for more thoughts on talking to people.

## **TWO | Forming an Organizing Committee**

The first step in forming a DSA local is forming an Organizing Committee (OC). The goal in forming an OC is to get about three to five people who are interested in doing the necessary work to start a local. Ask the DSA national office for possible contacts in your area. There may be none, but in larger cities there tend to be many dues-paying DSA members, and even in smaller towns there may be a handful of nearby members and sympathizers. Many older members joined a long time ago and may prefer just to send you a check – not such a bad thing – but there will likely be a few who have been waiting all this time for someone to contact them and stir things up again. This happened in Los Angeles in 2010. However, to receive the contact list you must be a dues-paying member yourself, and of course we will ask you for some information about yourself if you have not previously been active in DSA. Either the national director or someone from the Local Development Committee of DSA’s National Political Committee will give you a call.

Next, talk to your friends, family members, or co-workers. Many people will be curious, and willing to give it a try. A great way to find progressive activists who might find DSA attractive is to attend meetings of organizations that address issues such as peace, civil rights, the environment, reproductive rights, worker rights, or immigration reform, or your local Nation Magazine discussion group, Jobs With Justice, Move On, NOW, NAACP, progressive faith-based groups, labor council, or other organizations compatible with DSA’s agenda. Simply identify yourself as DSA and offer to speak with interested people. Finally, there are other ways to find members. These are discussed in the Publicity section. Check that part of the guide for advice on ads, posters, tabling, and more. Remember also that to create a strong foundation for the local, try your best to recruit an OC that is diverse in race, gender, age, etc. Keep this in mind when deciding which groups to approach.

If you take these simple steps, you should be able to recruit a few members to form an OC. Once you have five members who have paid dues to national DSA and are working together, fill out the OC application form that is an appendix at the end of this manual and send it to the national office so that the National Political Committee (NPC) can approve your group as an OC [see DSA By-Laws]. The office will then post the contact information you sent on [www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org) so interested people in your area can find you.

### THREE | The First Meetings

Now that you have a potential OC, set up a planning meeting so you can discuss strategy as a group. Basically, the point of an Organizing Committee is to prepare for the first few general meetings and activities. At the OC meeting, be prepared to answer questions, but try to keep it as friendly and casual as possible. The goals of the planning meeting are twofold: 1) planning, and more importantly 2) getting to know each other! The reality is, you need to be recruitment-oriented even with the new OC, until things really begin to move. You might start with a brief discussion of what DSA is and what democratic socialism is, and then talk about why you want to start a local and what you would like it to do. Some of those present will want to identify their previous political history and/or current activism and ask how DSA fits in. Again, remember to listen just as much as you yourself talk – this is key to organizing.

Once everyone is pumped about democratic socialism and DSA, remember to make it clear that the first order of business is to form a local. This is the best way to stay organized, maintain visibility, and be able to press your demands on targets. Now you can get to the more exciting stuff: Have a brief discussion of the OC's collective vision for the organization and the political "lay of the land" so you'll know how a DSA local will best fit with your political environment. Every community is different, therefore each DSA local relates to its community in a unique way.

Brainstorm together what groups already exist that are working on related goals, especially coalitions. This is the "political turf" that you will be dealing with. If there are already tons of progressive groups, you might function as a multi-issue group that connects the dots about different forms of oppression, or as a more discussion-oriented group, where all your members are active in other activist groups and you lend DSA's name to campaigns as a coalition partner, while your primary DSA activity might be to organize film showings or book discussions, host events and social gatherings about democratic socialism and how it informs your activism. In more conservative communities you might serve as the only opposition voice to the right wing, so you'd structure your organizing to initiate campaigns.

Float ideas but don't get wedded to specific projects, since there will soon be more members who will also want a say. Also remember to tailor your plans to fit the resources and abilities of the people you will be working with. Don't create too much pressure by insisting on having the perfect large meeting right away. A small but lasting group can slowly grow into a big one. A brilliant program followed by burnout gets you nowhere. For further discussion on picking projects, see PART THREE: TWO Deciding on an Action.

The OC should also define its short-term goals, including establishing a local and increasing membership. At this point you'll need a reality check. How many hours can each person in the room give this week? Next week? The week after? ... If a big meeting with an invited speaker is too much work, try a smaller meeting with a DSA video or a letter-writing party. If the main organizer has time now but not ongoing, try setting up a table in a public place to pass out information and have people stop and sign a petition or write a letter about an important local issue (and make sure to collect contact info for anyone interested in learning more about DSA).



The recently revived Los Angeles DSA local holds its first meeting

If a bigger meeting is possible, go for it! Discuss and delegate tasks to the members of the OC for getting together the first general meeting, which is very important because it launches the local and should develop a strong base of members. Tasks that are necessary to have a successful meeting include securing a good location, a well known speaker, strong publicity, turnout calls in advance, creating the agenda and choosing someone to facilitate the meeting. To organize all these tasks, it is important to create a timeline. For example, at least six weeks out invite a speaker, reserve a room, and start tabling or making announcements at local events; four weeks out, figure out an agenda, post fliers, pick a facilitator; three weeks out send out emails to progressive community groups, and try to recruit all your friends. One week out, do another round of major publicity with posters, emails, etc., and of course make phone calls to all the interested contacts you've made.

#### **Location: Where will people be comfortable?**

The first item is securing a good location for your first general meeting. As with most meetings that you will be a part of planning in the future, it should be in a centrally located place easily accessible to the

groups that you are trying to reach, in areas where people would be comfortable to go, such as a community center, library, union local or liberal church, at a time that would be convenient for them. A meeting room at a restaurant, coffee shop or bar is a possibility, but it may be noisy, smoky, uncomfortable for people recovering from alcoholism, or embarrassing for people who can't afford to pay for food or drink. A private home could be used for OC and committee meetings but won't work for larger, widely advertised public meetings. Make sure that your location is also wheelchair accessible.

After deciding these basic parameters, you should try to secure the chosen location on as regular a basis as possible, for instance, once a month at the same time on the same day. At your first meeting you should be able to invite new members to the next meeting.

**Keeping up the Momentum:** Especially when you're starting out, it's important to create a good "buzz." Be sure to do as much publicity as possible, especially about your first general meeting or kick-off event. For example, in addition to sending an announcement to local progressive email lists, post fliers on community bulletin boards, set up a table at a community event, or place an announcement on local radio calendars and in "alternative" weeklies. The important thing is to spread the energy and excitement around. See PART SIX: TWO Outreach and PART SIX: THREE Media for more ideas.

Ask a reliable OC member to maintain a consolidated phone, mail and email contact list. Invite your contacts to each general meeting, specifying the time, place and date. Send an announcement out to any local progressive email list-serves that exist, and re-visit the other friendly organizations you have identified. Actually attending one or more of their meetings works better than just phoning or emailing the leaders. Let them know of your first meeting, invite members and state your willingness to work with them once you are organized.

**Agenda: Make it interesting!** The next item that should be prepared before you have the kick-off public meeting is developing an agenda: a list of items to be discussed, with time allotments for each item. Otherwise, your meeting may drift into chaos.

A basic first meeting agenda would begin with the moderators introducing themselves and briefly describing some guidelines for discussion which make it clear that everyone is equally welcome to speak, but everyone must be respectful of each other, and no one should dominate discussion. Then, do introductions around the room. For example, each attendee could state their name, their job and their other affiliations if they wish, and the reason they came to the meeting that day. Make sure to pass around a sign-in sheet for

people who are there, to collect phone numbers and email addresses. This is crucial!

Next, do an introduction to DSA. Someone in the OC should have a relatively brief statement prepared (5 minutes or so). The statement should include the core unifying tenets of the organization (such as democracy, solidarity, liberty, justice and equality, and of course, anti-capitalism), the national/international organization (people are often comforted by knowing that they are not alone in this struggle), and the types of things that a democratic socialist community group could do (i.e., activism, discussion groups, etc.). Talk about why we call ourselves socialists, rather than simply progressives. This statement could be split up among more than one person (in fact, it is better that way).

You could then have a speaker, such as a National Political Committee member or well-known DSA members such as a local faculty person, author or long-term activist. For example, the Los Angeles local featured Peter Dreier, the well-known director of Occidental College's Urban and Environmental Policy Program, a DSA founder. As it is a first meeting, it's good to discuss something simple, like "what is the biggest issue to you in America today?" This discussion, if facilitated properly, can engage the new members and get them excited about doing something about issues of common concern. Another approach: One of the Atlanta local's best-attended meetings was a panel of members giving their ideas about democratic socialism and what attracted them to the concept, followed by audience participation.

It's very important to make room on the agenda for a discussion of possible projects that would address the members' concerns. Start with the ones already brainstormed by the OC. People may want to just have some more discussion about their politics and DSA or even form a study group, but try to find a more active project the group could take up. Host a public speaker or film series, work on a local progressive's electoral campaign, help a local labor or environmental campaign or form a contingent for a demonstration, to give the group a chance to experience working together for change, not just talking about it. In 2007 one new OC held a successful fundraiser for independent socialist Senate candidate Bernie Sanders, which gave the members a feeling of accomplishment and brought in more members. Write down people's concerns and suggestions as they say them (best do this with a marker on a large piece of paper at the front of the room, so everyone can keep track as well).

The last item on the agenda should allow for some time for announcements. At that point, someone should also announce the time and place of the next DSA meeting, a working meeting to explore how to put the members' ideas into action.

A sample agenda that might include all of these things (in a made-up locale “metropolis”) would look as follows. Just be conscious of time, as people might get restless after a long while. Keep the meeting on track and dynamic and you won’t have that problem.

## **Democratic Socialists of Metropolis – General Meeting**

**7 pm, Sept. 6th, Central Library community  
meeting room**

- 1.) Introductions
  - A. What are we all about? ( ask people to say their name, job or affiliations (optional), and why they came tonight) (7:00)
  - B. What’s DSA all about? (7:10)
- 2.) Speaker or Discussion: What is the biggest issue to you in America today? (Or other current topic) (7:20)
- 3) Brainstorming on future activities and actions. (7:40)
- 4.) Next meeting (7:55)
- 5) Announcements (8:00)

**Facilitator:** Keep it going. It is also very important to pick a facilitator for this meeting. We will spend time on “Facilitating Meetings” later in the guide, since that will be a necessary skill for all future organizing. But simply put, a good meeting facilitator should make sure that everyone gets to speak, that nobody dominates discussion, and that the group stays on task. Two people can share this job at a meeting.

**Refreshments:** Providing simple snacks such as cookies or bagels, with coffee, tea, water or apple juice is always a good idea, and you can pass around a hat or leave a jar on the table to cover costs. If you do this, mention it in the publicity.

**Ending:** Leave folks wanting more! Be sure your meeting has a good ending. Have a time set and don’t let it drag on (one hour is generally a good amount of time, but people can generally handle an hour and a half). If people leave before the meeting is officially over, they may not be coming back. Thank everyone for coming, announce (or decide) the next meeting time and place and make sure anyone who has agreed to do something knows what they’ve agreed to do. When the meeting is over, however, don’t run off. People will often hang out and talk. People too timid to speak up and ask questions in the meeting may want to ask you something afterwards. Make yourself accessible. Perhaps invite everyone to go to a nearby restaurant. At

this meeting and all others, avoid being cliquish! Remember, we’re all brothers and sisters in the struggle, and no one sticks around if they feel rejected.

Your first public meeting is very important. For some people, this may be the first time they’ve met other left-leaning folks. The meeting should be impressive, but not intimidating. It shouldn’t be too formal, but it should be structured. We’ll talk more about meetings later, but remember, every meeting could be somebody’s first meeting, so being welcoming is key.

Far more information on doing a larger meeting is in PART THREE: ACTION: THREE Organizing Public Events.

## **FOUR | Turning Your OC into a Local**

As you get going and begin to build up a regular membership, you should aim to become an ‘official’ local, chartered by national DSA and eligible to send voting delegates to the national convention and receive services from the national office.

**Becoming a DSA Local.** A DSA local is made up of 15 or more members who pay dues to the national organization. Contact the national office to 1) submit the members’ signatures and contact information and 2) ask for a sample constitution (set of bylaws) that you can adapt, then file your constitution with the office. The National Political Committee will vote on officially chartering you as a local. For more details about these requirements, see the national DSA constitution under “resources” at [www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org).

DSA does not hound, harass, or harangue our members for money, but we rely on dues and member contributions for our very existence. They are the only source of funding for Democratic Left and what modest support for locals the National Office can give.

Your new local may want to establish outreach to members and nonmembers via a newsletter, website, phone tree, email list, postal mailings, Facebook or other social media. See PART SIX: Getting the Word Out: TWO Outreach. You may want to acquire equipment such as a megaphone or banner. You will need to raise money. See PART FIVE: STRUCTURE AND PROCESS: SIX It Takes Socialist Cash.

**Opening a Bank Account** Even though you won’t start out with much money, this is a good thing to do. Many banks or better yet credit unions will let small, non-profit groups open free checking accounts. People are more willing to donate if they make the check out to “Metropolis DSA,” as opposed to “Lex Luther,” and a checking account makes it much easier to keep track of expenditures if you have a major event such as an awards dinner. You will need to get a taxpayer ID number in order to open a bank account.

Once you are a local, the national office can give you DSA's to use.

**Put the Social in Socialist** As much as we care about building a better world, most people who join organizations of any kind are also looking for a community to belong to, and the left is no exception. In addition to your meetings, activism, study group and fundraising events, be sure to have some less demanding social occasions during the year, such as a December holiday party, summer pool party, sing-along, May Day picnic or simply going in a group to an appropriate film or play. These give people a chance to get to know each other, form friendships and even find partners. Don't underestimate the importance of this.

## **PART THREE: ACTION**

### **ONE | Campaigns and Action for Change**

As Frederick Douglass famously said, "without struggle there is no progress...power concedes nothing without a demand."

A great deal of the work of any DSA local will be spent on actions, as part of a strategic campaign for social change. Democratic socialism is about fighting for structural changes in our society, empowering the oppressed and building a movement to challenge capitalism, sexism, racism, homophobia and imperialism, and having a vision for a better, more just future.

Every tactic we use (pickets, rallies, press conferences) should be part of a bigger plan – for example, pressuring your state's senators and representatives to vote for the Employee Free Choice Act, which makes it fairer and easier for workers to form unions. Our struggles should not only aim to create change that improves people's lives, but also to weaken the power of capital and empower people to make sure that the improvements truly last.

Your local's focus and structure may depend on its environment:

- Are there other socialist groups around, and how are they viewed?
- Are there active groups or coalitions dealing with DSA concerns such as peace, labor, the environment, immigrant rights, or local development issues?
- Is there already a multi-issue progressive group in your city?
- Is there a progressive candidate for local office worthy of and willing to accept help from DSA members?
- Is there an unsatisfied interest out there that you can organize? For example, while Atlanta had one of the highest rates of foreclosures among American cities shortly after the Atlanta local organized,

there was no movement in the city to protest the causes and lack of remedies for the foreclosure epidemic, so the local worked with other groups to form the Atlanta Fighting Foreclosure Coalition. This strengthened ties with our allies, gave us entry into diverse communities and raised the profile of DSA in the city.

**Choosing an Issue.** Since DSA is out to transform society, and since we are interested in many important issues, many locals have difficulty deciding where to focus their attention. Consider these questions: Are some members particularly interested in one issue and willing to devote time to work on it? Is there an issue of local relevance that you could work on together with allies in the community? Conversely, is there an issue so neglected that it can become your niche? How can work on this issue strengthen (or weaken) the local? Who will the opposition be? What intermediate goals could make a big issue more feasible? Is the rest of DSA working on a national project in which your local could play a role (all locals are strongly encouraged to participate, to the degree that they decide, in national priorities developed by the National Political Committee, our national, elected leadership)? When your local takes part in a national DSA project, there may be a manual for the project, and there will almost certainly be materials produced by the national organization or by other locals.



If you pick a topic that is not on the public's radar screen yet, be sure to do extra organizing. Hot-button issues in national and international politics are important to consider; however, the best topics are ones with a direct relevance to your audience. If in doubt, look at your local headlines and watch the local news. Listen to the catch phrases, and look past them to see the bigger issue. Furthermore, as organizers, you should pick an issue that people can get involved in immediately. If

there is a single-issue group or coalition that is already doing good work on the issue, offer to co-sponsor an event with them. (See also PART SEVEN: WORKING WITH OTHER GROUPS.)

During the last few years DSA has adapted an Economic Justice Agenda and a Social and Economic Bill of Rights. Your local should consult these documents as it seeks to plan an action agenda. In some cases the DSA priorities fit neatly with campaigns being conducted by other progressive forces, and in other cases your group may be the first to take action in your community. If you hold an action or host a speaker on SEBOR issues such as healthcare, jobs or foreclosures, be sure to make copies of SEBOR available and refer to national DSA's commitment to addressing those needs.

A good DSA campaign or project does several things:

- It focuses on an issue that is relevant and exciting to people in your community.
- It allows the local to make specifically socialist arguments about key issues.
- It facilitates close cooperation with other progressive organizations, unions or community groups.
- It raises the profile of the organization, and attracts new members.
- It is enjoyable and educational for the DSA activists working on it.

Actions take many forms, from a mild press conference to a fiery rally. In this section we'll go through some of the process of conducting various types of actions.

## TWO | Deciding on a Campaign or Action

The group taking on the issue should hold a brainstorming session in which ideas are thrown out, without criticism. Next, discuss and evaluate each idea and determine, as a group, the best course of action. List the ideas on paper. Decide: What are the best reasons and methods for taking action? Possible types of activities include:

**Educational** Speaking to groups or organizing forums, leafleting, writing letters to editors or op-ed columns, tabling at shopping malls or public events, teach-ins, etc.

**Making Opposition Visible** Rallies, pickets, street theater, banner hangs, vigils, marches, etc.

**Influencing elected representatives** Writing, calling, emailing, petitions, lobbying, etc.

**Actively withdrawing consent and compliance** Refusal of cooperation (as with soldiers refusing to fight a war), boycotts, strikes, etc.

**Disruption** Direct action and civil disobedience. DSA advocates nonviolent resistance.

Important things to consider when planning any campaign or action:

**WHO:** Who do you need to convince? Who will be receptive to the message? If these are two different audiences, have a message for both or make your main message appeal to them both. Who can be reached? Always remember that the secret of successful organizing is that trying to convert people who disagree with you totally should not be your focus. Your attention should be more geared toward getting those who remain undecided to support your position, encourage those who agree with you to engage in more activity, and empower those who are active to become confident organizers in their own right.

**WHAT** is our message? What symbols, images, slogans, props, colors, sound bites, etc. express our message?

**WHERE** is the best location for a rally or demonstration? Is there a location at which we can directly confront some aspect of the issue in question or reach crowds of people? Where are your exit routes? Where is the best place to be visible? What are the hazards?

**WHEN** will the action be most effective? When will people be around?

**HOW** will we carry out this action? Who will be doing what?

A powerful action has an entrance and exit strategy, and a climactic moment in between. What will that be? How will you know when it's over?

Afterwards, evaluate the outcome and debrief what worked and what didn't. Plan the next one. Repeat.

## THREE | Organizing Public Events Public Forums

Public forums are educational events that present more than one speaker, representing different aspects or views of an issue, and – ideally – include testimonies from people directly affected by the issue and perhaps already taking action to address it. Some of the most important considerations in organizing a public forum are getting compelling speakers, having good publicity, getting an accessible venue, and following up with action. Review PART TWO: ORGANIZING A DSA LOCAL: THREE The First Meetings on planning meetings.

**Speakers** The goal is to find a speaker who can eloquently and intelligently provide information and express your point of view – and it really helps when that person is well known enough to draw people to the event. Depending on the issue, call local organizations. If you're hosting a forum on labor issues, call a local union; if you're having a forum on civil liberties, call the ACLU. Popular college professors also usually make great speakers. Some speakers will want payment or

travel expenses, and this can be raised among members, or from local ally groups, churches, and unions.

It's a good idea to involve people directly affected by the issue and ask them to tell their story. For example, to address housing issues, your local Legal Aid Society might be willing to recruit a client facing foreclosure who is willing to tell their story, or an NGO that helps homeless people might know a homeless person who will speak. If you are discussing a plan for a new nuclear plant, find someone who lives near the plant site and is working with their neighbors to raise questions about its safety. If you are discussing the war in Iraq or Afghanistan, contact Veterans for Peace or Iraq Veterans Against the War.

If members of your own local have expertise and feel confident about a pertinent topic, by all means feature them! You can always ask the national DSA office for resources like fact sheets, related articles, talking points, or do a little research yourself. It's a great way for members to develop confidence articulating the democratic socialist perspective on a wide range of issues. You can also have someone from the local on a panel with two other speakers, or do an introduction slightly longer than usual.

**Event** When everything is in place for the forum and the publicity drive is underway (see PART SIX: GETTING THE WORD OUT), it is time to start thinking about the actual event. It would be great to print up a program, not only listing the speakers, but also including a brief introduction to DSA. Consider whether a member or friend can audiotape or videotape the forum (with permission from the speakers). Make sure any equipment the speakers may need is available, such as a sound system or a screen and projector. The day before the event, it is never a bad idea to call your speakers and re-confirm. Be sure to make clear what their topic is, how long they can speak, and what the other panelists will be speaking about.

At the event, be sure to set up a table. This table should be made available to your guest speakers to distribute their literature. Also, you should have DSA literature on hand and a sign-up sheet (you may want to have a table at the door and have everyone sign in). At an appropriate point, plug DSA. Mention your meeting time and invite all interested people to attend. If you have events planned, announce them. This is best done in the introduction or the conclusion.

The next day, or soon after, call your speakers and thank them. Also, be sure to personally thank everyone who worked to make the forum happen. Finally, make sure to promptly add new names to the DSA general announcement listserv and phone tree.

**Films** Showing one or more films is perhaps the easiest event you can organize, though it's important to

include discussion afterwards so you can bring out the democratic socialist perspective. Choose a film that will draw both progressives and the general public. If possible, have refreshments. If you're showing a film about oppression in Latin America, ask a local Latin American restaurant to donate food. Have a DSAer introduce the film and make DSA announcements afterwards. For low-key events DSA-made videos are available.

**Awards Dinner.** This kind of event is not only a great fundraiser, it also attracts guests who have not previously been in contact with DSA but are open to learning what we are about, helped by congenial company and a good dinner. The keynote speaker should provide important insights on a current topic, from a democratic socialist perspective.

## FOUR | Organizing Rallies

Rallies are all different and the tone of a rally depends greatly on its focus. An anti-war protest is very different from a rally calling on the City Council to raise the minimum wage. There are a few general considerations that are common to all rallies, though.

**Location** As with everything else, location is crucial. Depending on the size and scope of the rally, appropriate locations will vary. The main things to consider



are visibility and accessibility. Be sure your location is somewhere people can get to at the time of the rally, and that it is visible to the surrounding community. Also, be sure it's not too big. If your rally of 100 people only fills up a tenth of the park, it looks a lot smaller than if you're on the steps of the courthouse. Be sure to find out if a permit is required for the location. Calling your local police department or parks department will put you in the right direction.

**Sound** A bullhorn is fine for 100 people or so, but you may want to rent a sound system for anything larger than that. Generally speaking, wireless amplifiers can be rented for less than \$50. Be sure to check the batteries!!

It can be quite beautiful to empower more people to participate in the discourse at an open mike, but this scenario tends to require much patience and respect. A diplomatic MC is a must. If this is something your group wants to do, make sure you think about how to do it, and how people can take away a larger message from the event.

**Length** Keep the rally short. A half hour is enough; one hour max. Otherwise people will drift in and out, and the crowd will look small. The exception is lunch-time rallies, where the idea is to draw in many people briefly as they go to and from lunch.

**Speakers** Generally, it's better to have a few short speeches rather than one long speech. Try to find people who you know are lively and fiery speakers, and ask them to speak for five minutes. No matter how great a speech, people tend to lose their focus after more than a few minutes. If this issue affects many different parts of the community (as virtually every issue does), or has several organizations working on it, be sure that a wide range of speakers is represented. Consider diversity as you ask people to speak. Always remember: different strokes for different folks. While one person may respond to a Marxist analysis of a problem, another might be moved by a faith-based point of view. (Side note on religion: The Left ranges from atheists to devoutly religious people. Some people hate rallies that involve invocations, praying, and spiritual songs. But for some people, especially in certain communities, the struggle is rooted in their spiritual faith. There's no right or wrong answer, this is just a good thing to keep in mind).

**MC** Be sure you have someone to be the "Master of Ceremonies." Much like any other facilitator, they'll have to get things started, introduce the speakers, and make sure everything goes smoothly. If you have one person emceeding and/or leading chants, someone else

should be nearby to make sure the next speaker is on hand and handle logistics issues that arise.

**Entertainment** Some people only like to march and chant, march and chant. However, most folks want to have their spirits lifted a little. Music, puppets, street theater, and other forms of gaiety can help make an action both fun and effective. Colorful puppets are a favorite with the media as well. Depending on the action, this might not be appropriate, but having at least one song is always nice. If you want people to sing along, pick something everybody knows, and bring along the lyrics on some leaflets. If you can't find anyone to play music, try setting up a boombox with your sound system. If you're having a stationary rally rather than a march, you can play political music as you set up. This sets a festive, upbeat mood for the event and definitely helps attract a crowd. A cheap, easy way to make your own entertainment is to turn five-gallon buckets into drums. You can get these buckets for free from lots of restaurants. Just drill two holes, and run a string through. Drums are great for a march.

**Chants** A fun pre-rally activity is making up chants. Have someone at the rally with a list, ready to get people going, perhaps between speakers. Make sure the slogans are clear and easy to say over and over. Be original, and type some of the chants on leaflets to hand out.

**Signs, banners, leaflets** Be sure to have signs for people. Most folks won't think to bring a sign, and those that do may have small lettering or might not have the message you want. (At a Metropolis Peace Rally, people showed up with signs saying "Kill Your Leaders" and "Vote from the Rooftops.") Make at least one big banner that passing cars can see. Have informative leaflets to pass out that include your contact info.

**Recruitment** Assign someone to walk around with a sign-up sheet. You may also want to set up a table with your literature, buttons, etc.



**Security** Depending on your focus, the need for security will vary. You'll want to be prepared with peace keepers (trained people in your group who volunteer to keep an eye out for trouble) and police liaisons. Assuming your action is legal and not overly controversial, and that the KKK is nowhere nearby, you should be okay. Planning civil disobedience or any action with a high probability of arrest is not to be taken lightly, and you'll need to look into relevant training that won't fit in this manual. If you are anticipating arrests, be sure to line up a sympathetic lawyer, preferably one who will be on hand or send a staff member to observe the action. You should also consider who else might be arrested – for example, having the cops start arresting protesters at a worker solidarity rally will put undocumented immigrant workers in a very bad situation. The DSA office can help put you in touch with trainers in peace keeping and non-violent resistance.

**Ending** Surprisingly, this is easy to overlook. Be sure your rally has a clearly defined end, perhaps something that leaves people feeling upbeat and gives them a clear next step to take, such as signing a petition. Announce your next meeting; maybe close with a song. Keep an eye out as the rally breaks up. Police have been known to target individuals leaving a demonstration.

**Media** Ideally you have prepared a press advisory and sent it out in advance of your event. Have a press release available for reporters at the event (this is basically the article you'd want published, because sometimes lazy reporters do just that). Also have a press person clearly identified with a name tag who has practiced giving a concise message about why you are holding the rally.

## **FIVE | Traveling**

Major national protests and conferences such as the United States Social Forum are a good chance to combine the fight for social justice with an enjoyable group experience and exposure to fellow activists from other areas. DSA will often organize a rendezvous for members coming to large protests, which along with national conventions is a great way to get to know other DSAers and YDSers from across the country. You can always check the website or call the office to find out about meeting spots for protests. Also, DSA can sometimes find housing in major cities, so be sure to check with the office. Some of your comrades may be willing to put you up.

Be sure though, that as you plan the trip, you don't forget to plan what to do afterwards. Locals often have meteoric experiences around out of-town protest. A flurry of organizing culminates in fifteen or twenty people traveling to a protest, only to be followed by a slow

dwindling afterwards because no one knows what to do now. Trips to protests are a supplement to local organizing, and should never be the sole focus. Consider holding a public follow-up event where participants in the protest explain the issue to others, connect it to local concerns if possible, and share their experiences at the action. Bring cameras to the event – a brief slide show or video adds a lot to such a presentation, if you have members with the equipment and time to produce one.

## **SIX | Electoral Work.**

A socialist organization may run its own candidates; remain aloof from electoral politics; support an independent or third party candidate; or support progressive Democrats. DSA – which is not a political party – has chosen the latter two options, though they are not without their challenges.

DSA feels that because of the way the American electoral system is rigged, third party electoral campaigns are usually a dead end, but there are exceptions. We supported Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont because he was a democratic socialist with a good chance of winning, though opposed by a well-funded Republican. (Sanders won.) DSA also supported a Green Party candidate for mayor of San Francisco because he had a good shot at winning. (He didn't.)

Some Democratic Party candidates whom we would like to support do not wish public identification with DSA, while others have no problem with it. In Detroit, DSA is visible at the state Democratic Party convention and endorsed three candidates for state office in 2010. Two of them won their primaries. Boston DSA runs endorsements and candidate profiles in their newsletter "The Yankee Radical."

Most locals that have identified a candidate they feel comfortable supporting do so by encouraging members to contribute money, phone bank, register voters or perform other volunteer roles in the campaign – but as individuals. In Atlanta two progressive candidates for the state legislature asked the local members to do this; one spoke at a meeting of the local while the other met with some members informally. If there is a coalition in your area that supports progressive candidates, this is another opportunity for DSA to work in coalition with other like-minded folks.

Very important: Our electoral work is limited by federal and state laws governing nonprofit organizations. DSAers across the country were able to donate funds to Sanders through the DSA PAC. Since then, the Citizens United court decision has somewhat expanded the options for 501 (c) 4 organizations like DSA.

If you are considering support for a candidate, FIRST contact the DSA national office, request a

copy of its July 2010 “Memo on political activity,” and then carefully study the memo! It would also be a good idea to consult with a sympathetic local lawyer who is familiar with the laws of your state. Then, contact that candidate or his or her staff. Invite the candidate to address a DSA meeting. Depending on the response, discuss what members wish to do and form a committee to organize your activities. You can send messages about the campaign to your mailing list or through your newsletter, but do not ever give the candidate your mailing list! (This is considered an in-kind contribution under election law.) If you decide to do something such as raising funds or phone banking on an individual basis, make sure the candidate knows you are DSA members. This will pay off later. If the candidate wins, the struggle is not over; you may need to monitor events and remind him or her of the campaign promises that won your support.

### SEVEN | Letter Writing

Sometimes you need a more modest event – for a new, small group, between bigger events, or for a neighborhood branch of a local. Invite members and friends to gather to write letters to the editor or letters to an elected official on an issue. Bring paper, pens, fact sheets, laptops, markers and big paper to put on the wall for a brainstorm. Start by discussing the issue and brainstorming talking points. Review what makes a good letter to the editor. Then, everyone writes their letter. Ideally, if wireless is available, email the letters on the spot. Use a similar format for letters to elected officials. The national organization can supply kits on some issues.

A variant on this is the postcard table, a useful tactic to reach elected officials when a key activist has time but only for a short period. Use cardstock and follow postal regulations to print up postcards that say, e.g.:

<p><b>Dear Representative _____ :</b> <b>I urge you to cosponsor HR. xxxx.</b> <i>[Leave an inch blank.]</i></p> <p><b>Signature :</b> <b>Name :</b> <b>Address :</b></p>
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Get permission to table – outside in good weather, perhaps in the lobby of a coop or art movie theater. Have a fact sheet, postcards, pens, and the names and addresses of relevant elected officials with information about where their districts are. Ask passers-by to sign postcards giving their names and addresses and adding their own favorite arguments in the blank.

Collect the cards and take donations for postage. Ask interested people to sign up for the local’s email list.

### EIGHT | Amplify your Action

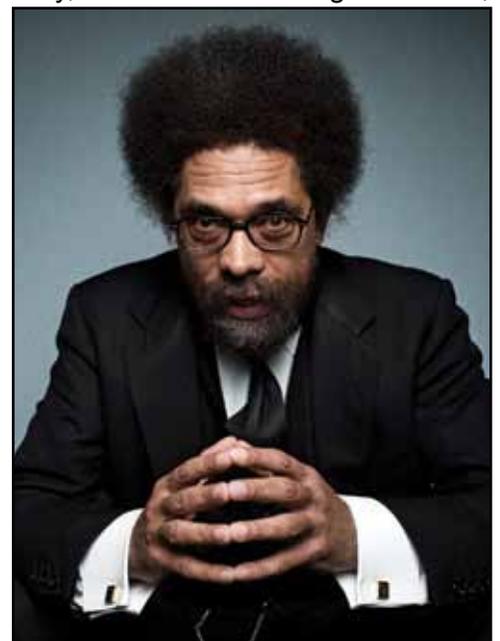
Whatever your local does, take pictures. You can send a report and photos to the DSA national office for possible publication in our Democratic Left newsletter, and of course include them in your local’s newsletter or on your website or Facebook page.

## PART FOUR: THEORY

### ONE | Democratic Socialism as a Unifying Theme

DSA places a high priority on political education. We don’t think that activism alone is the answer. We want to give people a foundation for a lifetime of struggle. Therefore, we engage in ongoing reflection on long-term goals and socialism. Rather than being something dry, completely abstract and isolated from our day-to-day organizing, theory can be tied to every action you take or campaign you conduct as a DSA local. A democratic socialist perspective keenly attuned to feminism, anti-racism, and anti-heterosexism is what sets DSA apart. Our ideological base and systemic analysis gives us a foundation not seen in other multi-issue, progressive groups, while our internal democracy and willingness to debate and discuss sets us apart from dogmatic organizations. At the same time, we recognize that while the impulse that leads many people to democratic socialism may be easy, learning to be able to justify and explain it to others takes some work.

Learning about socialism, which has a rich and often confusing history, can be intimidating. However, if it is done in the context of a supportive social environment, it can be exciting. For DSAers, democratic socialist ideas and vision infuse our organizing, and our political perspective and attention to theory is a constantly evolving tool to inform our work. We must constantly reflect on the



Cornel West, Princeton professor, author and honorary DSA co-chair.

lessons of past movements to help us figure out how to organize better now. Smart, well-educated activists are better activists, because they make stronger arguments, recruit more people to our cause, and better represent DSA. The trick is to make sure your local doesn't turn into a group of armchair intellectuals, but emphasizes a chief tenet of our mission, which is to educate ourselves and others. Remember, socialism is a balance between theory and practice.

## **TWO | Education**

### **External**

While all DSA-organized events should have an informational component, some are more clearly educational than others. Public forums and speakers are good, activities that serve to raise awareness around an issue (see PART THREE: ACTION: THREE Organizing Public Events above). Some other ideas are: film showings, an awards dinner (also Public Events), public access TV and community radio, and social media (see PART SIX: GETTING THE WORD OUT: TWO Outreach).

### **Internal**

#### **Building a Democratic Socialist Understanding**

Study groups and inviting speakers to your meetings are the most common forms of internal education. If your meetings are interesting and informational, as well as productive and an opportunity for socializing, people are more likely to keep coming back.

**Study Groups** Many leftists enjoy study groups that are structured like book clubs. A committee should solicit suggestions of books or articles to choose from, ask someone to briefly summarize the content of each session's reading (especially if you anticipate that some people will not have time to read the whole thing) and ask one or two people to provide commentary to get the discussion going. If someone has a background in the subject that's great, but it's important that they raise questions for everyone to address, rather than speaking for the entire meeting. A facilitator should make sure that no one dominates the discussion. Study groups usually draw more interest if there is a balance between theory, such as Marx, and recent publications about current issues.

**Speakers** (see PART THREE: ACTION: THREE Organizing Public Events)

## **THREE | Challenging Supremacy in all its Forms**

It's easy for white, middle class, male and/or straight activists to assume they're "cured" of racism, sexism, classism, and other isms when they join

the movement. Unfortunately, becoming a socialist doesn't involve being "born again." Dealing with privilege, supremacy, and discrimination is a life-long task for all activists. DSA places a high priority on anti-racism and feminism, and we've compiled various tools and resources available to locals in this crucial work (like the YDS Feminist Reader that is available upon request).

We encourage all of our members to keep an eye out for discriminatory behavior in themselves. Remember, it's not the job of the oppressed to point out oppressive behavior to the oppressor! Even if it's inadvertent, the best activists can do or say things that others will find racist, sexist, homophobic or classist. Not only can this alienate potential allies or members, it also holds you back as an activist.

## **FOUR | Ideology**

DSA is a democratic organization. While the broad tenets of democratic socialism unite our organization, we don't force our members to accept a particular "party line" or let the finer points of debate divide us. DSA members run a broad spectrum of ideological beliefs. Some members are atheists, while others are religious. Some are Marxists, some not. Minority views can be publically aired. More than anything, DSA is about helping people develop a vision for democratic socialism that informs their work, and a huge part of democratic socialism is democracy.

We encourage all members to read and educate themselves. Biannual conventions are an especially good time for members of different locals to come together and learn from each other. The DSA member listserv is another way to share views on DSA's program and politics; any member may ask the national office to sign him or her up to receive and participate in these email discussions, which are sent out once or twice a week.

# **PART FIVE: STRUCTURE AND PROCESS**

## **ONE | Structuring Your Local**

According to the Constitution and By-Laws of DSA, locals are free to organize themselves as they see fit. This helps foster diversity of DSA as a whole, allowing each local to respond to the local circumstances and group dynamics. Some locals have officers and use parliamentary procedure, while others use the consensus model (explained in the "structure and process section"). The important thing is that locals operate democratically, and actively monitor themselves to limit and ideally exclude racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, or other forms of discrimination.

## TWO | Scheduling Regular Membership Meetings

It is important to have regular meetings in a good location. Talk amongst your members and decide on a good time, probably in the evening or on a weekend, and a central location. Most locals meet monthly, or every two months. Rooms in libraries, coffee shops, progressive churches and union halls are all good places. Meeting in someone's home is not appropriate for general meetings, but is fine for smaller committee meetings.



Meetings should have an agenda, a time limit (one to one and a half hours is best if possible), and a welcoming atmosphere for any new people. Always have folks introduce themselves, and briefly explain DSA to new people. Try not to bore people with too much business. You may want to have time for discussion on an issue or have a speaker at your meeting. Depending on the focus your local takes (discussion- or action-oriented), your meeting will follow suit. Try not to let your local become totally geared to only one or the other. A theory-oriented local will bore many people and betray a central tenet of socialism: the struggle, while an activism-only chapter has no reason to be a DSA local, since it's not developing a strong awareness and understanding of socialist ideas. It's not a bad idea to combine your activist activities with a regular reading circle or discussion group, or reserve part of your meetings for discussion.

## THREE | Structure and Process

As your local grows, you'll need to decide how it should operate. DSA locals vary widely in the methods that they use for making decisions or electing leaders. Your local should talk about process (the mechanism by which group decisions are made) and structure (the dividing up of responsibility) to determine what works best for your group. The local's constitution is simply a written account of a group's structure and process.

**Accountable Leadership** The most common way to structure your local is to elect members to carry out various duties. You might elect a chairperson or co-chairs,

a treasurer, a recording secretary, a membership secretary to keep contact lists and send notices, an outreach coordinator, or any other number of officers delegated to fill out various tasks. At-large members can be added. An officers' meeting – to which all members are invited – should meet in between the general meetings, to make necessary decisions and plan the general meeting agenda. Try to make sure the work gets spread around and the officers don't end up doing all the work, with no input from others.

**Committees** Establish committees with separate meeting times to carry out specific business and have them report to the general meeting – for example, a budget committee, a study group planning committee, a newsletter committee, and an ad-hoc committee to plan and carry out an event. Committees could be elected from the group or be made up of volunteers. Committee chairs could be elected officers or could be chosen by the committee. See that the more routine work is spread around as much as possible, and make sure that at the general meetings or in the newsletter you recognize the work everyone does.

**Consensus** This is a decision-making method in which every member of the group must agree (or abstain) before a decision is made. If even one member votes "no," the decision doesn't pass. Achieving a consensus can be a long, difficult process. Sometimes, it is impossible. When it is possible though, the result is a decision that everyone is happy with. It's often worth the extra time to clear away the doubts of one or two members and reach a consensus as opposed to just winning a vote, but it's also important to recognize its limitations, such as one person holding back an otherwise consensus decision, or being inaccessible to folks who don't have a lot of free time to spend in meetings.

**Majority Rules** In this model, a vote is taken to make decisions. You might require a simple majority, or two-thirds or some other number. This method is faster, but can lead to a sizeable minority of the group being upset with a decision. Discussion can also be too limited, if a narrow majority wants to move an issue along.

Locals will make their own decisions on the issue of structure and process. Some may use both ways of operating. Your committees may operate on the consensus model to bring something before the main group, which would then vote by majority rule. You may decide to vote on some issues but require consensus for others. There's no right or wrong way. The important thing is that locals function democratically, and that responsibility is evenly shared.

## FOUR | Facilitating a Meeting

One of the most crucial skills for an activist to possess is the ability to facilitate a meeting. Proper facilitation ensures that meetings run smoothly, address all topics on the agenda, and produce results. Furthermore, it ensures that everyone gets ample opportunity to speak, that the meeting is not dominated by a few individuals, and that everyone is as satisfied as possible with the results of the meeting and the process used. Toward this end, here are a few points that any facilitator should keep in mind:

### Formality

Be respectful of the time and effort that people have put into coming to your meeting, and remember that new people are usually potential members.

- *Be early and start on time.* No one wants to be the first one at the meeting, especially if it's their first one. Get there first. When meeting time rolls around, don't assume it's best to wait for more people to show up; this disrespects the ones who made the effort to arrive on time. If you are expecting other people, let everyone know, and ask them if they mind waiting a few more minutes. Better yet, start with an item the late folks can miss, like an introduction to DSA, or an informal discussion of a political issue.
- *Prepare and distribute or post an agenda.* Meetings run far more smoothly if everyone has a sense of the structure. The act of writing out an agenda also helps provide structure for the meeting.
- *Keep an eye on time.* Your local may want to have time limits for discussion, but even if they do not, a good facilitator keeps an eye on the clock and knows how to gently let someone know that they need to wrap up their remarks, that the group needs to reach a decision on an issue, or that you have the room reserved for only ten more minutes.
- *End at an appropriate time.* If you only have the room reserved for a set time, make sure as much as possible is covered. If you can stay all night, make sure you don't. If the meeting looks like it could go late, it's okay to point out the time and let people know it's okay to leave. It's better to set another time to meet, or table the rest of the agenda until the next meeting. People's impressions of a meeting are better if it ends on time and in an orderly fashion. Thank everyone for coming.
- *Talk to new people after the meeting.* Some folks may not speak up in a meeting, but may want to ask the facilitator (whom they might see as the "leader" of the group) a question after the meeting. Be sure you and your friends don't run off the second the meeting is over. Hang out outside, make yourself accessible, and at all costs avoid being or

appearing to be cliquish with other members. After a few minutes, you may want to invite people to join you at a nearby bar or restaurant.

### Inclusion

It is important to acknowledge that people from different backgrounds have different kinds of expectations that must be respected. New people may sit back and look interested without saying much. This may be because the discussion or terms used are over their heads, because they feel more like a guest than a member, or because they really don't have anything to add. Try to figure out which reason it is. Invite quiet people to speak, but don't pressure them. Always be aware of potential barriers to participation. Gender, race, class, and age are things that may cause barriers, so be conscious of how these factors are being dealt with at meetings. Create clear structure and have good facilitation to ensure that you maintain an atmosphere in which everyone can be comfortable being themselves and participating.

- *Make sure no one is left behind.* If people are using acronyms or terms that new members might not understand, ask them to explain. Preferably, don't ask, "Does everybody know what A.B.C. stands for?" This might intimidate a potential member. It's just as easy to say "By the way, A.B.C. stands for..." Or, as the facilitator, you can ask for clarification; this lets other members know that it's okay not to know everything. Above all, avoid being condescending!
- *Make sure everyone who wants to speak gets a chance.* This can be tricky. Some people have something to say but will only speak if asked a direct question; others are mortified at the thought of being called on to contribute in front of everyone. Sometimes, people really don't have anything to say that hasn't already been said. A good way to give everybody a chance to speak without singling out anyone is to go around the room, asking everyone to give their opinion on the matter. This can also speed up discussion on a topic. Above all, you should not allow those with naturally assertive styles to interrupt, or otherwise block, the contributions of other, less assertive members.
- *Make sure your meeting is inclusive.* Leftist groups are often dominated by men, white people, or folks from the middle or upper classes. This can create an unintentional environment of intimidation or isolation for people coming to the meeting who don't fit the same background as the majority of the group. Again, the trick is to be inclusive without putting people on the spot or tokenizing anyone. Making your organization fully inclusive and challenging supremacy is a daily,

on-going task. In some ways though, it begins in your meetings. If people don't feel comfortable at a meeting, they certainly won't feel comfortable in your organization. This sets you up for a vicious cycle: because your organization isn't inclusive, no one who feels excluded will ever join and tell you why it's not inclusive. The flip side of this coin is that many people won't want to join a group if they feel tokenized. If they're being asked to speak "as a person of color," etc., they'll probably feel valued as a statistic, not a person. In general, don't wait for someone to tell you how you may not be inclusive- make sure you're always considering it in the first place (i.e., it's not a women's job to point out sexist behavior, etc).

- Talk to people after the meeting. If someone didn't speak up during the meeting, ask them what they thought of the meeting afterwards. Thank them for coming, and let them know you value input from everyone, even at their first meeting.

## **FIVE | We Are All Leaders Here**

Cesar Chavez said "I am an organizer, not a union leader. A good organizer has to work hard and long. There are no shortcuts. You just keep talking to people, working with them, sharing, exchanging and they come along."

Leadership and organizing are not particular activities reserved solely for the officers of a DSA local. Leadership, simply defined, is the capability to get things done through the best possible use of available material and human resources. It involves (1) getting people to work well together and (2) realizing a goal.

Real leadership is the art of getting people to cooperate and assume responsibility, and organizing is empowering others to become part of something bigger than themselves that can help them realize collective goals. It is not deceptive, coercive or manipulative and does not serve the aggrandizement of the leader's



Michael Harrington (1928-1989), DSA founder and author of *The Other America, Poverty in the United States*.

personage. Leadership is an exercise requiring skills that can be learned and developed. Leaders should be enthusiastic about the idea of DSA and devoted to the local and the enrichment of its abilities. Hopefully every member of DSA can be considered a leader, but with different strengths.

A leader works with two things: the job at hand, and the people who will do it. You can tell that an organizer is successful when you see that the job gets done and the group stays together. The best leaders are not dogmatic; they listen to and learn from the membership. The autocratic leader is usually only successful in alienating those who would follow. A good leader patiently asks for assistance and gets it.

There is a whole spectrum of leadership talent. Some people are comfortable speaking in front of groups; others are not. Some are keen judges of talent, some are clever organizers, and others are hard workers.

## **Communication**

Communication, the getting and giving of information, is the single most important skill a leader must master. The key facets of good communication are: getting attention, actively and accurately listening to others, synthesizing various ideas, giving clear oral instructions followed by precise written instructions, and giving feedback.

Feedback is important. In order to be a good communicator and therefore a good leader, one must know how well the group's intentions are being understood. Remember that the above skills are useful not only for sending out information, but also for receiving information. A skillful listener pays close attention when spoken to and asks questions to verify comprehension of the message being sent.

## **Sharing Authority**

People are DSA's best resource – sometimes the only resource! So the leader must have skill in putting their talents to work. Leaders can and should encourage members to acquire and hone a variety of new abilities, especially leadership skills. Also, utilizing the talents of the local's membership will inevitably bring the group closer together.

Sharing authority is essential for many reasons. Leadership responsibilities within a successful group extend beyond the talents and work capacity of a single person (and they should, that's why it's called a group). The very essence of true leadership is trusting in the membership, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and delegating tasks and responsibilities accordingly. The organization becomes stronger when each individual believes that they are not working for the glorification of another member or a leader, but for the issues that brought them to the group. Together,

the group and its leaders accomplish more than the sum of their individual efforts.

### **Leadership types and relation to leadership sharing**

**DELEGATOR:** Handing out narrowly defined details with no authority, i.e. passing out grunt work.

**PERSUADER.** Gets another to agree with the plan of action, thus causing him/her to become more personally committed to the given task.

**CONSULTER.** Seeks to integrate ideas and methods with other members on a particular activity.

**DELEGATOR OF AUTHORITY:** When a leader delegates an entire task (campaign, event, etc.) to another member, giving that person the authority to see it through to completion.

Leaders should attempt to move across the spectrum of leadership styles from merely giving orders to true delegation of authority. This is the best way to develop more leaders, which is really what organizing is all about.

### **Developing new leaders**

A key characteristic of good leaders and organizers is the ability to train others to step up even before the old leaders have moved on. The strongest locals are those that involve everyone in their activities, and consciously work to develop the skills and leadership of new members. Delegate well-defined tasks with clear instructions to get people started on the path to taking charge. Ideally, some of your leaders in the local could pass their local responsibilities on to others, while they go on to national leadership positions in DSA. Think about it this way: if I moved away tomorrow, would the local thrive?



## **SIX | It Takes Socialist Cash**

**Buying Stuff** There are a few things you may want to consider purchasing early on. A second-hand bullhorn or megaphone can be found on the Internet for around \$50; newer or nicer ones cost more. A waterproof banner can make a small contingent much more impressive at demonstrations, though it will cost more than \$100. A button-maker is a great investment. Mailing a newsletter or flyer requires printing, envelopes and postage. Other items will come up, of course, which brings us to...

**Raising Money** A typical DSA local will have a small budget. Other things that might come up in addition to one-time purchases (see above) include infrastructure costs (a PO box or internet account), travel costs for national or regional protests or DSA conferences and events, and initial costs for an event

(room rental and refreshments for a film showing or awards dinner, for example).

Money can come from several sources. First, you can hit up members. They can pay dues to the local as well as the national, to give your bank account a little starting money. Members will often put up a little cash for small, spontaneous expenditures, but don't expect anyone to enjoy making a habit of it. Regular tabling can bring in some donations, especially if you're talking about a hot-button issue.

For more money, you're going to have to solicit donations. Ask local unions or community organizations with wealthier members than your local. The most important thing in asking for money is telling people what it is for and then using it well. While a union or group may be willing to give you a small start-up donation, after that, they're much more willing to give you money if you are asking for a specific reason, and can point to other times when you used their donation well. Send thank-you notes!

Anytime you have an event, pass the hat or ask for donations at the door. You usually can't charge admission if you're showing a film, but you can always ask people to make donations or put a donation jar on a literature table. You should also consider having events that function solely as fundraisers. Having a friend's band play or throwing a "socialist party" can be a great way to raise money and put the social in socialism. Throwing joint events with other progressive organizations can also encourage greater cooperation between groups.

Some of the larger locals such as Atlanta, Chicago and Detroit host an annual awards dinner with a keynote speaker that honors local leaders in the progressive community (who will also bring their friends). Sale of ad space in a program booklet, as well as ticket sales and a request for larger donations from people willing to be listed in the booklet as "host committee" members can bring in a few thousand over the cost of the dinner. Boston DSA holds a less formal event and runs ads in their newsletter. Contact the chairs of those locals to ask for tips if you decide to do this.

## **SEVEN | Your Local and the National Organization**

Your local is defined by the DSA national organization. It is made up of those members of the national organization who live within your geographic area, as specified in your local bylaws. To keep abreast of national DSA concerns, subscribe to the email list News from DSA at [www.dsaua.org](http://www.dsaua.org). You may also want to join the discussion list `dsamember`; send email to [dsamember-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:dsamember-subscribe@yahoogroups.com). Better yet, go to [http://groups.google.com/group/dsa-activist/subscribe?hl=en\\_US](http://groups.google.com/group/dsa-activist/subscribe?hl=en_US) and apply to be put on DSA Activist, the listserve for key activists in the organization.

A few times a year, contact the national office and request an up-to-date membership list for your local. That's how you find out if members have moved into your area or new people joined, or for that matter whether the people who said they would go to the website and join really did so. From time to time you (or your local's designated contact person) will hear from the national office or from NPC committee members urging participation in some action and offering helpful materials or perhaps asking for your news. In the summer of every other year you will hear from the National Director telling you to elect delegates to the next National Convention. That is where locals and members ultimately determine the direction of the organization.

When a local recruits a new member and actually gets a check or cash for dues, the local may keep the money but must send the new member's information to the national office. The next year, the national office will begin collecting renewals from the member.

## **EIGHT | Technical Note About the National Organization(s)**

There are actually three DSAs: Democratic Socialists of America itself, a 501.c.4; DSA Fund, a 501.c.3; and DSA PAC. The locals are part of the 501.c.4. Dues and contributions are not tax deductible, and the organization can get involved in legislation and politics with the exception of partisan election campaigns (and even for these certain types of involvement are allowed). The 501.c.3 can get tax-deductible contributions and mail at a lower postage rate, but it is limited primarily to educational efforts. The PAC can endorse and even give money to federal candidates. See National Director's memo of July 2010 under "Resources" at [www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org).

## **PART SIX: GETTING THE WORD OUT**

Since we live in a society run by capitalists that includes massive oppression based on class, race, gender and sexuality, it makes sense that most folks don't consider themselves socialists or even understand what that means. This doesn't change the fact that locals need members to function, and we're not going to transform our society if we don't attract people.

Many people share many of our ideas about fairness and equality, even though most Americans don't have the slightest idea what DSA is. The more people understand what we're about, the more likely they are to support us and think about the larger arguments we're making about the problems with capitalism. Our job is therefore to educate folks, and the only way to do that is to get them to notice us (in a good way). There are hundreds of thousands of Americans who share our politics, so if we do our work, our potential

growth is tremendous! It's also important to have publicity if you're trying to force someone in power to do what we want.

## **ONE | Recruiting**

It is important to invite new people to join DSA. The movement won't grow on its own. Prioritize outreach and recruiting! Don't assume that you and your friends are the only democratic socialists in town. Don't get complacent about the size of the local, make sure to recruit at your events and organize events specifically to recruit, have a welcoming atmosphere for new folks, and always follow up on potentially interested folks.

Ever stop to wonder why so many people whose politics are the same as ours have not joined yet? A large part of the answer is that few American radicals realize the importance of building an organization that unites the movements of the left around a long-range strategic vision and political project. Admittedly it's hard to recruit people to a movement that doesn't have the resources to win victories for the people who need them most, such as working people, women, and people of color, when people can work for organizations that do have those resources and don't have the burdensome "S word." For many other good folks, collective commitment and organization are abhorrent. They want to be independent radicals.

But often, people haven't joined simply because they haven't been asked. When DSAers do ask, with humility and sincerity, new members discover that DSA is a friendly socialist organization, with many levels of involvement, a tolerance of ideological diversity, a commitment to working with liberals and non-socialist progressives, and yet with a vision of social change worth dedicating one's life to. Let's not be shy: ask someone to join DSA every chance you get.

### **Why should activists join DSA?**

DSA is a unique organization. We are the largest nation-wide democratic socialist organization, with sister parties around the world (we're the only U.S. member of the Socialist International). We believe in affecting politics in America by building a democratic grassroots



movement that unites activists nationwide, giving them a stronger collective voice. We take electoral politics seriously, but also emphasize grassroots organizing and social movements. We're involved in political activity but we're not a political party. We combine activism with theory. Difference of opinion is valued in DSA. No member agrees with every stand DSA has taken on every issue, nor are they expected to. We do take stands on issues though, informed by our democratic socialist analysis, which covers all sectors of society. All these things set us apart from other groups.

Being an activist is great. But we believe that in order to change our country and world, we need to help build a massive, diverse, strong, dynamic movement for democratic socialism. As a national organization and as a part of national coalitions, DSA can organize in ways that no local group could do on its own. We've built a national organization that can lend support to locals. When you pay dues to DSA, you're paying for a small national office that organizes national conventions and a youth section, helps organize new locals, produces literature covering a broad range of topics, and supports ongoing national campaigns. As a member, you're an equal part of a democratic movement that always needs people with skills, ideas, and energy to help move us forward.

These are all good points to stress when inviting people to join DSA. Make it clear that being part of a national organization and an international movement is different from being a local activist. Our collective power is much stronger! Furthermore, as Americans we live in the belly of the beast, which carries with it a special responsibility. Our comrades abroad have a great deal of respect for those of us who struggle for socialism here. While the US is not the hardest place to be a democratic socialist (our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe or Tibet are often tortured and killed), it sometimes feels like the most lonely. This is one of the reasons why building active partnerships with our friends in other countries can be so exciting – being able to see that we are not alone in our desire to build a better society. Joining the larger movement is a step everyone committed to fighting for social justice, economic equality, and world peace needs to make.

### **Making Socialists out of Liberals, Radicals, and Progressives**

Some things that you will probably hear from folks as you try to build a DSA local include...

- "Socialism is such a bad word. I'd rather be in a multi-issue organization that doesn't use the word 'socialism.'"
- "I'd rather work on a concrete issue or campaign that can get something done."
- "Looks good on paper, but it will never happen, so why waste my time in a socialist group?"

Here's some ammo for answering these points. First of all, remember that none of these concerns are completely invalid. America is a strange place to be a radical. In other countries, many trade unionists, students and other progressives would identify themselves as some sort of socialist. Progressive Americans must deal with a peculiar situation. What may seem like a cop-out is really more of a coping mechanism. Help them cope.

### **1. We can't deal with capitalism without socialism.**

You can try to build progressive movements without using the word socialism, but this is difficult to do without identifying the main problem – capitalism. Once you start talking about capitalism, and trying to do something real to take away the problems that it causes, people are going to label you or your politics as socialist. Until we can have a frank discussion in this country about capitalism (and, therefore, about a socialist alternative), we won't be able to really tackle the major problems facing society.

### **2. Anything that truly challenges capitalist power will be red-baited anyway.**

The society that we want to live in, whatever we call it, one of justice and democracy, won't be achieved without confronting the unequal distribution of power in the economy. Struggles for practical reforms, like better labor laws or increased environmental protection,



can only go so far if they aren't united by a vision of comprehensive social change. That vision, if it is radically democratic and anti-corporate, will be denounced as socialist by its enemies, even if we couch it in generic "progressive" terms. It is important that we, not them, define what socialism means.

### **3. DSA is the place for you.**

We welcome and encourage people involved in single issue or "identity politics" work to join us. You don't have to give up your activism in the Queer Pride Alliance to be a socialist, and DSA locals always get involved in broader multi-issue umbrella groups. If you think that both long-term and short-term political goals are important, why not continue this work as a democratic socialist?

#### **Tips for: Recruiting Other Activists**

- On the personal level, never harass someone to join before they've begun to think of themselves as a socialist or as having politics close to ours. Offer to put them on the email list as a non-threatening first step. Once they're close, do invite them to join. Some people think they are members because they hang out with the local or are on the local email list, but they have never joined.
- Always let people know they are part of a national and international movement. Make sure to talk about what other locals are doing and what projects the national is involved in coordinating. Bring folks to national events so that they can feel themselves connected to the national organization. Press them to pay dues and make sure that people know that literature and other materials don't fall from the heavens; they come from a national organization that needs people and money to operate.
- Always think about who your potential members are: Who is close to the local? Which activists are floating around without a firm commitment to other groups? Which liberals are ready to take the plunge into the political avant garde? (Again, it's not about being a trendy radical – we're serious about winning rights for people.) Hold a potluck or open house and sign them up. If you are weak among feminists or people of color, examine your local activists and leadership and try to make your chapter impressive and comfortable for politically active women and people of color.
- Get a reputation for being the best coalition partners and organizers in town. Be friendly and open, committed to the larger causes you are working for as well as to DSA. But make sure that people know that the reason that you are there is the sense of commitment that you have as a DSA member. Talk one-on-one with people in coalitions who seem curious about us. Give them some literature and invite them to meetings. Don't thrust literature into everyone's

face before every left gathering, but don't let even mild interest go by without a response.

- When working in multi-racial coalitions, after having developed comfortable relationships with African American and Latino/a, and other activists of color, carefully consider if individual activists would welcome an invitation to a meeting. People of color are often reluctant to join predominantly white organizations, as many DSA locals are. But your coalition work and the atmosphere of your local may impress people of color enough to overcome these reservations.
- Stress to your independent socialist friends that "an unorganized socialist is a contradiction in terms." Socialists believe that only cooperative, collective action can change people's lives for the better, so it's a no-brainer. If they agree with more than half of our agenda, they belong in DSA.

#### **Tips for: Recruiting the General Public**

- Always be visible and always be proud. Show your best face to the world, whether it be the most attractive, numerous banners at a rally, or the most interesting, properly staffed literature table.
- Always give a good rap about the organization at new member meetings or meetings where lots of new folks are present. Make the group sound like all the things they want: activist yet reflective, committed yet friendly, militant yet with a sense of humorous perspective. Don't forget to invite new folks to hang out in a non-meeting, social setting. Invite them to join the email list. That's not as threatening as joining the organization.
- Emphasize our commitment to democracy. Let people know that we stand with the democratic socialists internationally who struggle to expand democracy into the economy in the face of growing corporate power.
- Accentuate the positive. Don't stuff your rap with answers to every objection people have made in the past. Your audience may never have thought of those objections.
- But be prepared to answer objections, IF they actually arise. "The Soviet Union was a horrible place."  
A: The Soviet Union is not our idea of a socialist country, etc. "You are tied to the Democratic Party."  
A: We helped to get Bernie Sanders elected to the Senate in 2006.
- Consciously work to reach beyond the radical subculture. Concentrate on dialoging with liberals and progressives, not just with "activists." While the key activists in your local, and yourself, may come from this subculture, this social circle can become a very comfortable trap. The growth of the democratic left is going to come from conversions of liberals, not from convincing independent anarchists

or far leftists. It is easy to fall into an easy companionship with the same old faces at the Stop the War events, even when they are not so open to our politics, and then skip the Progressive Democrats meeting. We need to recruit from our left AND our right. We must work to make “apolitical” people care about bread-and-butter issues confronting them, such as unemployment and cuts in pensions and funding for public education, in addition to the plight of others in their communities and around the world.

- Finally, always remember to stress that American politics is warped because of the absence of a respected, visible, democratic socialist movement. Stress to left liberals that none of the reforms they care about, from universal health care to environmental protection to affirmative action, can be won without a movement willing to take on corporate power directly; a movement willing to directly challenge capitalist political priorities; a movement willing to overturn the stigma that has been given to socialism, for that is what keeps America from achieving even the minimal welfare state that has been built by socialists in all other industrialized democracies. It takes a socialist movement.

Example of an “elevator” rap:

*Socialists are radical democrats: we want people to have an equal say in the decisions that affect their lives. We live in a capitalist country... a small corporate elite controls our workplaces, the government and the media and get extremely rich and powerful while the rest of us deal with debt, unemployment and poverty. If you'd like to hear more about fighting for something better – for democracy, for socialism, and a decent life for everyone – then come to our first meeting, it's on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.*

## TWO | Outreach

Now that you have a sense of message, let's talk mechanics – creating publicity. Simply put, “publicity” is any form of communication presenting a point of view. That's how we (and Fox News, for that matter) get our message out. The best way to make sure your message comes across clearly is to think about the target audience that you want to convince and what will appeal to them, then present it yourself, as early as possible. Remember that variety and quantity both matter. Make sure people see your message, that they see it a lot, and that they see it in many different formats. What follows is a list of “home-made” publicity methods that are both “active” (that engage people with a DSAer, such as phone-banking or tabling) and “passive” (that don't require an exchange, such as putting up posters). Make sure you have a good mix of the two.

**Newsletter** (passive) Many locals produce a newsletter at least a few times a year, or monthly. Try to find someone good at graphics to make the newsletter attractive to the eye, so you can use it to recruit new members. It can include a calendar of events, reports on past events and ongoing campaigns, opinion pieces (not too long) and book or movie reviews. Try to get several different members to write the articles so it represents the diversity of views in the local, helps people feel they are contributing, and doesn't look like one person's production. Photographs are a must, and a cartoon is always good if someone can draw. Electronic distribution is most cost-effective, but print out some copies, in color if possible, for tabling, handing to new contacts you meet, and sending to those members with no email address. (See “But Don't Forget the Post Office” below regarding mailing lists.) Use a union printer or, if you just run off a small number of copies from your computer, say “labor donated” in the staff box.



**Website** (passive) Most strong DSA locals have a website. Check out the list of local contacts on the national DSA website for links. You'll need to find at least one reliable member who knows how to design and maintain a website and is willing to take this on. It's important to keep it up to date! It should include an introduction to your local and much the same content and spiffy look as the newsletter.

Consider using wordpress.com or blogger.com. These are originally blogging sites, but they can do much more now. You can set up static pages as well as a blog. They offer free hosting. One important positive is that they allow multiple authors, so the entire burden of the website doesn't have to be put on one person. You can also host a wordpress.com or blogger.com site on your own domain.

In addition to providing local content, your chapter should use the DSA Video Channel widget from Vimeo. You can also embed specific videos. You might also want to use the RSS feed from “Talking Union” (DSA's labor blog) and the YDS “Activist.” Both wordpress.com and blogger have tools that make it easy to use.

**Postering** (passive) Keep your poster short, simple, loud, and eye-catching. Make your main message BIG – people should be able to see it from fifteen feet away. Make the rest of your text pithy – people should be able to read it in one minute. Keep it visually consistent – more

than two fonts or more than two colors is distracting. Don't make it too crowded by filling every space on the page. In fact, leaving blank space calls attention to the text. Pictures and graphics can really add to a poster if they are clear and powerful. Don't forget to clearly lay out the time, date, and place of the event. Bulletin boards in coffee shops, supermarkets, laundromats, local hangouts and organizational headquarters are good places for posters. Find out your city's policy on posters, so that you don't waste time putting them up, if they will immediately be taken down, or if DSA will be hit with a fine.

**Email** (passive) Compose a short, easy-to-read message, with all essential info at the beginning, and send it to every progressive list-serve you or other DSAers are on that might be interested. You can also send it to friends and ask them to forward it to potentially interested folks. There are also often other ways to get the word out, like established campus or community calendars online or in email format, that you can add your listing to. Remember, many of your events will be aimed to educate more moderate folks and help them see why they should get more involved in supporting our campaigns or considering democratic socialism.

Be sure to collect email as well as regular addresses at every opportunity. There are several options for using email. You can have an announcement-only list, which is simply a list of email addresses for members and perhaps another for other interested people. Note: It is best to send large email blasts to yourself, with the recipients' names in the "bcc" line for privacy.

Another option is to use gmail. Set up an account like dsalocalX@gmail.com. There is a trick to use in sending out email to your list. Create a group (you can have more than one). Then send it to the list using the bcc list, while sending it to the chapter email in the "TO" field. If you don't do this then Gmail will reject your mailing as spam. If you register a domain name for your chapter and set up a domain you will most likely get one or more email addresses (e.g. chair@dsalocal.org) and the capability of setting up a list serve for the domain. These may not be the easiest to set up if you are not experienced. After you get your website and Facebook groups (see below) up and running, create a signature for your email (both personal and chapter), such as:

Jane Higgins  
www.dsausa.org  
www.anytowndsa.org  
<http://www.facebook.com/profile>

If you want to have group discussion, you can set up a Yahoo or Google group. You will probably want to make it a moderated list, at least for new members.

**But Don't Forget the Post Office** (passive) Believe it or not, some dues-paying DSA members do not use email or prefer not to be contacted by email, so you will need to keep a list of their home addresses for mailing newsletters and announcements in paper form. You will also need to keep home mail addresses for all members and contacts for special mailings such as invitations to an awards dinner or fund appeals that contain a return envelope.

**Leafleting** (active) Handing out leaflets on an active street gets information to a large number of people. Leaflets are very effective in publicizing an immediate and urgent event, like an emergency rally, and for distributing information on issues (or the schedule of events such as a film festival). One person can dispense hundreds of leaflets in a short time, so it is essential to have a lot of materials on hand. Making leaflets in 1/2, 1/3 or 1/4-page size saves money and paper. In the leaflet itself, ask others to relay the information or to pass the leaflet itself on to someone else. Be sure to include a phone number, email address and/or website for more information. Whenever possible, have more than one person engaged in the leafleting process at any given time. Be prepared for rejection and confrontation, because many people will ignore you and some may challenge you verbally. And remember, look into people's eyes, and smile confidently!

**Personal contact** (active) Word of mouth is one of the best (not to mention cheapest) means of promotion. Each of your members can bring at least two or three people to an event.

**Tabling** (active) Tabling is a great way to reach people, practice talking about democratic socialism, and get new members. Essentially, you set up a table in a public spot, put out some literature and buttons, and talk to



Tabling at the 2010 One Nation rally for jobs in Washington DC.

interested people. The best place to table is at a community event such as a public forum or outdoor festival – but be sure to get permission from the event organizers.

First, you need a table. If all else fails, you can always buy a card table. They're generally under \$50. Other than that, you'll want to have literature about your local and its next meeting, any relevant issue you are working on, copies of your newsletter if you produce one, recent issues of Democratic Left, and a couple of the briefer items in the "resource" section of dsausa.org, such as the shorter SEBOR pamphlet. It's often helpful to have a petition or other action item you can ask people to sign, to get them to stop at the table. Be sure to have a sign-up sheet, pens and pencils, buttons and bumper stickers to give away for donations, and a donation tin. Hang a sign identifying you either on the wall behind the table or from the front of the table. Have at least two people staffing the table at all times, in shifts if it's for more than a couple of hours. Be ready at all times to engage people who stop by and ask them to sign up for your mailing list, but be friendly, not pushy or argumentative.

**Phonebanking** (active and passive) While old-fashioned permanent phone trees are gone, phone banking is still useful. Elect a phone coordinator who is responsible for triggering a mass calling. The coordinator organizes the information to be announced, emails the volunteers to find out who is available on the needed days, divides the phone list into manageable pieces and sends pieces of the list to the phone volunteers, who now each have a list of people to call with information about the next big meeting or event. Many people respond faster to a phone call and want to hear a human voice. They are aware that it takes a bit more work to make that call than to email a list.

For regular meetings, you only want to call members of your core group, though it's useful to email everyone else as well. For large public events, assigning each core member 5-10 additional supporters (as well as the contact persons for other organizations) to notify can turn out a large crowd. The coordinator should check with phone tree volunteers to verify that calls are being made, and also be prepared to take up the slack if necessary.

**Using Social Media for Socialism** You may want to communicate with your members and contacts through Facebook or other social media:

**Facebook offers two options:** 1) Group and 2) Fanpage. For most chapters, a Facebook group should work just fine. Generally, you will want to have multiple administrators for the group. (Note that names of group administrators are public, while administrators of pages are not.) Facebook enables chapters with groups or

pages to create "events." In addition to sending invites to members of the groups, you can also send invitations to your friends who are not (yet) members of your DSA group. Other members of the group can also invite their friends. (There are also options for private meetings. Usually you won't want to use them, but they are available.) The event page tells you how many people are planning to attend, how many might attend, how many have declined, and how many haven't responded. And, here is the cool thing: You can send follow-up messages to each group. (But don't rely on Facebook exclusively to advertise events; posters, phone calls, mailings and calendar announcements are still essential.)

To most effectively use Facebook as an organizing tool, the chapter needs to have at least one person who is open to really making lots of "friends" on Facebook. Facebook has lots of tools that suggest friends. Make use of those. One trick to successfully using Facebook as an organizing tool is to create lists of your "friends." Make a list, "Local X DSA and contacts," for example. Then use it to invite additional people to your chapter events. (Not every DSA member will automatically join the chapter group.) More importantly, setting up a DSA list is an easy way to forward events from allied groups. (People who have already been invited by someone else won't receive a second invitation.) Another organizing tool on Facebook is the ability to upload pictures and videos to your group.

Just remember: using Facebook as your primary way to contact people and/or organize IS NOT SUFFICIENT.

#### **Other tools:**

Meetup is an organizing tool used successfully by the Howard Dean campaign and some Tea Party groups. A meetup group could function as a web home for a chapter and it has many of the social networking functions of Facebook. People who use Meetup presumably like to go to meetings. People on Facebook often like to do things online while sitting at home. On the other hand, there are fewer people on Meetup.com and it costs money. The Washington DC DSA chapter uses Meetup.

Posterous is a really neat tool that creates a blog from your emails. See [www.posterous.com](http://www.posterous.com)

Google tools. Google has a suite of on-line tools that should be extremely helpful for chapter organizing. Google calendars can be shared, a chapter tool can be embedded on a website, and there are tools to compare calendars and find a common available time for meetings. Google docs allows documents to be shared on line, for collaborative editing.

Public Access TV and Community Radio. A few DSA and YDS locals have developed weekly shows on their local public access TV station or community radio station. Examples are Ithaca DSA (TV) and Atlanta DSA

(three members have shows on WFRG-FM). These are great ways of reaching many more people than would normally come to one of your events. You can tape a guest speaker or forum, film an action with commentary, or interview people active on an issue (don't just give your own opinion). However, be sure no one person is stuck with all the responsibility for getting the show on the air each week; assemble a team of people who work well together. The local station will often be able to provide technical training. You may need to invest in a camera or audio recorder and mikes.

### THREE | Media

There are many different forms of media, and most areas have several of each. Dealing with the media properly is an important requirement for spreading your message, especially once you have a campaign, demonstration or public forum to publicize.

**Newspapers** Letters to the editor and guest editorials in local newspapers are some of the most effective ways of getting across ideas. It is usually not a good idea to be blatantly propagandistic about your organization, but rather to let your ideas speak to the readers. Some local papers will even do an article about your organization or event to fill the news columns. Most "alternative" papers, or even the entertainment sections of mainstream papers, have free calendars of events. Make sure to check on the deadlines to get in information before printing.

**Radio** Many radio stations, especially college and noncommercial community stations, run free public service announcements. Send them an event notice or do a PSA tape yourself (either 10, 20 or 30 seconds). Ask a public affairs show host to interview your spokesperson about your campaign or event. If members of your chapter are up to the challenge, suggest a debate with an ideologically opposed individual or group.

**Television** Some schools and communities will have TV bulletin boards that run PSAs. This works the same as the radio. Just call up and ask to be listed. Also, don't forget the public access channel. One DSA local has been hosting a weekly public access show for over nine years.

**Event Coverage** The best publicity you will get from the media is when they cover an event. It is, of course, important that the event is interesting and well attended, but there are a few steps that will help secure better media coverage:

**Before the Event** Compiling a list of all media outlets in the area with their phone numbers, fax numbers, and email addresses may take a little time but it will be

extremely helpful in the long run. Call newspapers to ask the name, email address and phone number of the reporter or editor most likely to be interested in your event. For TV, send the release to the assignment editor or news director. These days most press releases are sent by email, though they are easily ignored. You can also send them by fax, but those too may be ignored, lost or handed to the wrong person.

Write a press release. Look up tips for writing press releases in any good book on do-it-yourself public relations for nonprofits. Most important: A press release is not a manifesto, but rather a news article that you write yourself. Put the "who, what, where, why and when" in the first paragraph and keep the whole thing to one page if at all possible. A "quote" attributed to your spokesperson can express your opinion on a subject or give a call to action, which should not be in the body of the release. Be sure to include a date and your contact information. Send the release to all local media.

For television, think about how to give your event visual appeal and let the TV stations know if you will have puppets, street theater, a large chart or some other photogenic prop.

It's important to make follow-up phone calls to ask if the reporter or editor got your release, and to be prepared to send it again if they say no (which happens often). If they have the release, offer to provide a spokesperson to be interviewed.

**During the event** Designate a spokesperson beforehand, someone both articulate and responsible. Advice to spokespeople: If the media approaches you, make sure your own message gets across when you respond. The reporter's question will not be printed or aired, only your response. Have a simple, very short statement ("soundbite") ready to give if you are interviewed. Even print reporters are looking for short, vivid quotes rather than analyses. Try to sound confident and knowledgeable, not argumentative and angry. Remember that being quoted in the paper or on TV will get your message out further than any other format.

**After the Event** Call the media and comment on the coverage, especially if it was good. Thank them for covering your event, but complain if there was an inaccuracy. Surprisingly, they listen. A few people calling to ask why a story wasn't covered or to complain about coverage can go a long way – but always be polite, because you'll be dealing with these people a lot. If a busy reporter decides you're time-wasting or irritating, you've lost any future coverage. If the newspaper made a mistake, send a letter to the editor correcting the report in a firm, polite manner.

Publicity is very important for your local. It affects who hears about you, how they hear about you, and

what they think about you. It is important, in your own publications and in dealing with the media, to always put forth the best possible image.

## **PART SEVEN: WORKING WITH OTHER GROUPS**

Outreach and principled coalition work are crucial to building and maintaining an activist organization that can actually make social change, and to helping create a democratic socialist movement that many people can consider their political home. Developing a good relationship and reputation with other organizations is imperative to getting anything done. DSA has some name recognition on the Left, and your local will develop a name for itself as well. As your reputation precedes you, it is vital to maintain strong, healthy connections with allies, not just for the work at hand, but also for future campaigns and for building the movement.

Some people in other organizations will shy away from the word “socialist”, and we must be sensitive to their concerns about problems connected with getting red-baited, but more and more people are coming to accept it. When right-wingers called universal health coverage socialist, they handed us an organizing bonus. People began to think there must be something good about socialism.

Working in coalition with other progressive organizations is an important way to strengthen the left presence in our communities and articulate our socialist perspective to a broader audience while helping to move forward a cause or issues we believe in. Locals, however, should always work in coalition for the sake of the issue, not as a recruiting tactic.

The first step in working with other groups is to identify potential allies, such as unions, progressive churches, student groups, single-issue action groups, and other community organizations. Next, make direct contact. Look through the local paper to see if any groups have meeting times listed. Drop by and observe. Introduce

yourself and say you’re looking forward to working with them and helping out. Don’t be surprised if they’re not overly impressed. Community organizations and union leaders that have been around have seen left organizations come and go.

The only way to fix this is by working well over a period of time. Prove that you’re not out to steal their members or take them over. Ask if you can go to the meetings of your partner groups, and show respect. Demonstrate through your actions that you’re willing to do the necessary grunt work and aren’t just out for the glory. If you deal with organizations respectfully, they will develop respect for you. A few key practices will help you get started on a good footing:

- 1) Follow through.** If you say you can do something, or get so many people to an event, be sure and do it. If you’re not able to follow through, be honest and up front about it.
- 2) If you get money from a union or group, put it to good use.** Show them that they didn’t waste the money. They’ll be more willing to give you money in the future, and generally more trusting.
- 3) Invite people to your events, and show up to theirs.** After all, that’s what solidarity is all about.
- 4) Be clear and up front about what you want to get out of working with other groups.** Don’t go to groups made up primarily of people of color so you can try to steal members, for example, but rather for mutual education and solidarity. It’s not difficult to build a good relationship if you deal with other groups honestly and respectfully, and know when and how to be a good ally rather than a parasite.
- 5) Don’t let the coalition suck the life out of the DSA local.** If the coalition is primarily dependent on DSA members to function, but the public does not know they are DSA members, then it’s time to declare the work publicly as a project of DSA.

Final thought: It’s very important to keep a balance between coalition work and organizing events and projects under the name of your DSA local. Both are important – we need a larger, vibrant left community in which to work, but we also have to get our own name and ideas out to the public, which means doing things on our own, as well.

If you have questions, comments, or ideas that you would like to share with DSA, please contact us:

**75 Maiden Lane Suite 505  
New York, N.Y. 10038  
Phone: (212) 727-8610 • F: (212) 608-6955  
E-mail: [dsa@dsausa.org](mailto:dsa@dsausa.org)  
[www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org)**



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# Democratic Socialists of America

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We are members of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in \_\_\_\_\_ who wish to be recognized as an official DSA organizing committee. We understand we need at least five DSA members in good standing. We acknowledge this is one of many steps in becoming an official DSA local. We'll continue working with the DSA Local Development Committee and staff for as long as necessary. *(Please print clearly.)*

1. \*Name \_\_\_\_\_  
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\*Email \_\_\_\_\_

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\*Email \_\_\_\_\_

Of the above, # \_\_\_\_\_ should be listed on the national DSA web page as the contact for our committee.

Date submitted \_\_\_\_\_ By \_\_\_\_\_

Please return to DSA by email to ([msvart@dsausa.org](mailto:msvart@dsausa.org)) or mail to:  
75 Maiden Lane, Suite 505, New York, NY 10038  
212-727-8610  
[www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org)