YOUNG DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS

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DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST PERSPECTIVES

Why Unions Matter

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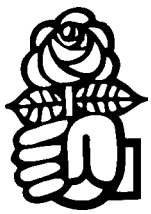
In this pamphlet, Elaine Bernard explains why anyone who cares about fairness and democracy should be excited about the labor movement. For democratic socialists, building and maintaining healthy unions is a crucial part of our commitment to economic justice. Bringing democracy into the economy, into the workplace, and into the daily life of society, is at the heart of our political vision.

Unions have always been an important part of how socialists seek to make our economic-justice principles come alive. Working people—gathered together and exploited in the capitalist workplace—are ideally positioned to fight that common exploitation cooperatively by asserting their democratic rights on the job and by advancing working class interests in the political sphere. Since trade unions are the predominant form in which working people join together to increase their own power, any democratic socialist strategy for social change must support the crucial role that organized labor plays—and can play better—in promoting greater democracy, equality and solidarity.

As young people, we face a future of work. Those entering or about to enter the workforce will encounter the terrible imbalance of power that prevails in our economy. We have a choice: we can either accept the status quo and take our chances as lone individuals or we can fight to make the global economy more accountable to all of us. By joining or organizing unions in our own workplaces, or by working with unions and other workers' rights advocates to promote what Bernard calls "industrial democracy," we can reshape our world.

Members of the Young Democratic Socialists often work on our campuses and in our communities to support union efforts. Many YDS members have been active members of their unions, and have gone on to work as officials, union organizers, staff, and as rank and file activists. At a time of almost unbridled corporate domination, working to strenghten the labor movement is needed more than ever.



Worksites, Organized and Unorganized

For too long, there has been a self-defeating division of duties among progressives in the US. Unions organize workplaces, while other groups—the so-called social movements and identity groups—organize in the community. This organizational division of turf misleadingly implies that there is an easy division between workplace issues and other social struggles. Furthermore it suggests that wages and benefits are somehow unifying and other social issues are divisive. These separate spheres of influence have resulted in the sad fact that US progressives often march in solidarity with labor movements and workers around the world, but often fail to consider the working majority here at home.

For activists striving for social and economic justice, the workplace is a crucial environment for organizing. It is often already organized, and not only when it is unionized; even non-union employees tend to share common hours, lunches and breaks, and most still go every day to a common location. By definition, everyone at the workplace is earning money, so it's a resource-rich community in comparison to many other locations. The production of goods and services occurs there. Decisions of importance are made and acted upon. It is a place where global capital puts it foot down. And anywhere capital puts its foot down, there is an opportunity for people to act upon it and influence it. For all of these reasons, the workplace is an important location for organizing—and not just for immediate bread-and-butter issues, important as they may be.

Democracy and Participation, or Benevolent Dictatorship?

The worksite is also a place where workers learn about the relations of power. They learn that they have few rights to participate in decisions about events of great consequences to their lives. As power is presently distributed, workplaces are factories of authoritarianism polluting our democracy. It is not a surprise that citizens who spend eight or more hours a day obeying orders with no rights, legal or otherwise, to participate in crucial decisions that affect them, do not then engage in robust, critical dialogue about the structure of our society. Eventually the strain of being deferential servants from nine to five diminishes our after-hours liberty and sense of civic entitlement and responsibility.

Thus, the existing hierarchy of employment relations undermines democracy. This is not to suggest that all workers are unhappy, or that all workplaces are hellish. Rather, the workplace is a unique location where we have come to accept that we are not entitled to the rights and privileges we normally enjoy as citizens.

But is the workplace really so autocratic? Why such an extreme characterization? Some illustrations of the uniqueness of the work environment, in which the normal rules of our legal system simply do not apply, are worth noting. For it is in the workplace that citizens are transformed into employees who learn to leave their rights at the door.

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Take, for example, a fundamental assumption in our legal system—the presumption of innocence. In the workplace, this presumption is turned on its head. The rule of the workplace is that management dictates and workers obey. If a worker is accused of a transgression by management, there is no presumption of innocence. Even in organized workplaces the rule remains: work first, grieve later. Organized workers protected by a collective agreement with a contractual grievance procedure can at least grieve an unjust practice (or more specifically, one that violates the rights won through collective bargaining). Unorganized workers, on the other hand, have the option of appealing to their superiors' benevolence or joining the unemployment line. The implied voluntary labor contract—undertaking by workers when they agree to employment—gives management almost total control of the work relationship. "Free labor" entails no rights other than the freedom to quit without penalty. That's one step up from indentured servitude, but still a long distance from democracy.

> "**WORKPLACES ARE** FACTORIES OF AUTHORITARIANISM POLLUTING OUR DEMOCRACY."

There is not even protection in our system against arbitrary and capricious actions by management. There is no right to employment security and no prohibition against unjust dismissal in the private sector such as exists in most other advanced industrial countries. The law of the US workplace is governed by the doctrine of "employment at will." There is some protection to ensure that an employee may not be dismissed for clearly discriminatory reasons of race, gender, disability or age. But that same employee can be black, female, older, white, male or whatever, and as long as the dismissal is for "no reason," it's legal. Most Americans believe that there is a law that protects them from being fired for "no cause." But they're wrong.

Free Speech for Whom?

A most glaring example of the power imbalance on the job concerns the freedom of speech. Often celebrated as one of the most cherished rights of citizens, most Americans are astonished to learn that freedom of speech does not extend to the workplace, or at least not to workers. Free speech exists for bosses, but not for workers. The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights applies only to the encroachment by government on citizen's speech. It does not protect workers' speech, nor does it forbid the "private" denial of freedom of speech.

Moreover, in a ruling that further tilted the balance of power in the workplace, the Supreme Court held that corporations are "persons" and therefore must be afforded the protection of the Bill of Rights. So, legislation that seeks to restrict a corporate "person's" freedom of speech is unacceptable. Employers' First Amendment rights mean that they are entitled to hold "captive audience meetings"—compulsory sessions in which management lectures employees on the employers' views of unions. Neither employees nor their unions have the right of response.

> "FOR A COUNTRY THAT PRIDES ITSELF ON INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS, HOW CAN WE PERMIT THE WHOLE-SALE DENIAL OF THOSE RIGHTS FOR TENS OF THOUSANDS OF AMERICAN WORKERS?"

It's almost as if the worksite is not a part of the United States. Workers "voluntarily" relinquish their rights when they enter into an employment relationship. So, workers can be disciplined by management (with no presumption of innocence) and they can be denied freedom of speech by their employer. The First Amendment only protects persons (including transnational corporations designated as persons) against the infringement of their rights by government—but not the infringement of rights of real persons (workers) by the private concentration of power and wealth, corporations.

Such limitations on workers' rights are incompatible with the requirements of a democracy. In comparison to European countries, the legal rights of workers in the US are remarkably limited. For a country that prides itself on individual rights, how can we permit the wholesale denial of those rights for tens of million of American workers?

Industrial Democracy or An End to Workplace Conflict?

History counts. Few people today remember that when the National Labor Relations Act, the cornerstone of US labor law, was adopted by Congress in 1935, its purpose was not simply to provide a procedural mechanism to end industrial strife in the workplace. Rather, this monumental piece of New Deal legislation had a far more ambitious mission: to promote industrial democracy. To achieve this extension of democracy into the workplace, the NLRA instituted "free collective bargaining" between workers and employers. Unions were to be encouraged, as it was understood that workers could not engage in meaningful collective bargaining without collective representation.

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Fighting for democracy in the workplace, and not simply the right to form unions, is vital to the restoration of labor's social mission. While unions are the pre-eminent instrument in our society to actualize workplace rights, it is important for unions to lead the charge against the entire anti-democratic workplace regime. Viewing labor rights as part of a wider struggle for democracy is essential for the growth of the labor movement today. With organized labor down to only 13 percent of the total workforce and less than 10 percent in the private sector, the vast majority of today's workers have no direct experience with unions. But as citizens, they have a concept of democracy and the rights of citizens. Unfortunately, American workers are schooled every day at work to believe that democracy stops at the factory or office door.

But democracy is not an extracurricular activity that can be relegated to evenings and weekends. And citizens' rights should not be subject to suspension at the whim of one's employer. The labor movement is the natural vehicle to lead the struggle for basic democratic rights inside and outside the workplace.

The authoritarianism of the workplace in the United States diminishes our standing as a democracy. Indeed, in the latter part of this century, instead of the democratization of the American workplace, the hierarchical corporate workplace model is coming to dominate the rest of society.

Unions and Politics: Constructing the Possible

For unions to succeed today they need to have a wider social vision. Pure and simply trade unionism is not possible. Most unionists recognized that politics is important to the labor movement and that there is nothing that labor can win at the bargaining table that cannot be taking away by regulation, legislation or political decision-making. It's therefore urgent for organized labor and working people in general to organize on two fronts—politically, in the community through political parties and social movements, and industrially in the workplace through unions. Unionists cannot leave politics alone, because politics will not leave unions alone.

To operate effectively in the contemporary political context; the labor movement must understand the challenge that the New Right presents for unions and the rights of working people. At 16 million members, the labor movement remains the largest multi-racial, multi-issue membership organization in the country. As such, it is a prime target of the New Right's assault on working people's rights, both in and out of the workplace.

> "THE LABOR MOVEMENT REMAINS THE LARGEST MULTI-RACIAL, MULTI-ISSUE MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATION IN THE COUNTRY."

Politics has always been fundamentally a contest of ideas. Political scientist Robert Dahl has defined politics as "the art of the possible," but for the working person today, it might be more useful to see politics as the process of constructing the possible. In essence, it is the process of deciding which issues warrant a societal response and which are best left to the individual.

The 1994 debate over health care reform—already a fading memory—exemplified this process in politics. The question was whether we should leave this critical service to individuals seeking private solutions through a maze of various insurance plans or whether society as a whole should organize a system of insurance coverage to assure universal, comprehensive, affordable, quality coverage for all. The Canadian single payer system was held up as an example of how the provision of insurance could be socialized, while leaving the practice of medicine private, and assuring complete freedom of choice of doctors. Although we have already socialized health insurance for the elderly through Medicare, many Americans seemed to balk at the prospect of socialized medicine for all. Yet in US history we have

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often done precisely this—socialized a service—transforming it from an individual responsibility to a community-provided right of all.

The fire department and fire service throughout this country at the turn of the century were private; fire service was an individual responsibility. Those who could afford it, and those who had the most to lose in case of fire, financed private fire companies in their communities.

The companies gave their patrons iron plaques which they could post on the outside of their buildings, to assure that in case of fire, that the local fire service would know they were insured and act promptly.

Of course fire does not confine itself to purchasers of fire service. And while the uninsured could engage in expedited negotiations with the fire service over fees when fire struck, fire spreads easily from the uninsured to the insured, and so it gradually dawned on the insured that the only protection for anyone in the community was to insure everyone. So, the insured sought to socialize the service, that is, extend fire service to everyone—through a universal, single payer, high quality, public system. Taxes, rather than private insurance fees, financed the universal system. And the universal system was cheaper, and more efficient. The quality was assured because rich and poor alike were covered by the system. Everyone could access the system as needed and everyone paid into the system through their taxes to the community. No doubt, the cynics of the day argued that the poor would take advantage of this social service, or that people would simply not be able to appreciate what they had unless they paid for it.

Through the political process, the problem of fires was moved from the realm of individual concern to collective responsibility. Today, the need for universal fire service seems obvious. Interestingly, the need for health care is still not regarded as a societal right. But that is the essence of the political challenge—to construct what is possible.

Who Decides: Market Values or Social Values?

Clearly understanding this point, the New Right has a program to construct a new political consensus. In the US and elsewhere, this program designates virtually all problems as the responsibility of the individual, whose fate is left to the mercy of the market. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher summarized this approach succinctly: "there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families." If there is no such thing as society, then there is clearly no role for government, or indeed collective institution of any sort—including unions. We are thus left only with individuals and their families, working in isolation, making decisions within the narrow context of the market, thinking only of themselves. This program seeks nothing less than the destruction of civil society, without which there can be no democracy.

> **"DEMOCRACY IS NOT** AN EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVTY THAT CAN BE RELEGATED TO EVENINGS AND WEEKENDS."

The market must not be permitted to replace social decision-making. Markets have their uses, but they are not to be confused with democratic institutions. Markets, for example, might be useful in determining price of goods, but they should not be mechanisms for determining our values as a community. Markets are oblivious to morals and promote only the value of profit.

To take an example from our own history, a slave market thrived on this continent for over 300 years. Nor did this market collapse on its own. It took political intervention and armed resistance –in a communal assertion of values—to abolish slavery. Markets are no substitute for the democratic process.

In a democracy, it's "one person, one vote." But in the marketplace, it's "one dollar, one vote," which, despite an appearance of neutrality, is an inherently unjust equation that privileges the rich at the expense of the poor. In such statements as "let the market decide," promoted as principle by the New Right, the market disguises human agency, while serving the demands of the wealthy whose dollars shape the rules of the market. According to "free market" ideology, government intervention is futile at best, and disruptive of the natural order at worst, and always unwelcome (though in practice the New Right uses government shamelessly for its own purposes, e.g. corporate welfare).

> **"MARKETS ARE** OBLIVIOUS TO MORALS AND PROMOTE ONLY THE VALUE OF PROFIT."

The elevation of markets as the sole arbitrator of value deprives people of a sense of belonging to a community. Instead, people feel isolated, which in turn leads to demoralization. If each of us is on our own, none of us can change very much, so we should just accept things as they are. No single individual can answer the big questions in our society. An individually can't opt for single-payer health care, or rapid transit, or address the problems in our public schools. So by default these problems become "unsolvable."

This frightening world view forces people to seek individual solutions and pits people against one another, reducing social responsibility and cohesion. If there is no such thing as society, then government is a waste, and redistributive programs are robbery. Anything that goes from my pockets into the community is a scam. Worse yet, anything that goes from my pocket makes it just that much harder for me and my family to survive. This is a zero-sum view of society where your gain is my loss, and an injury to one is their problem. And this is the view that will ultimately prevail if the New Right succeeds

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in its attempt to eviscerate democratic institutions—from government to communities to unions.

Unions and Civil Society

By destroying all collective institutions and making government regulation and actions appear to be illegitimate and infringements of individual rights—the New Right is destroying the last vestiges of social solidarity. They are, in essence, expanding the undemocratic regime in the workplace into all aspects of civil society, thus their determination to end entitlement programs and destroy unions.

The labor movement builds communities—that's what unions do. By bringing together workers, who have few rights, who are isolated as individuals and often competing against each other, unions forge a community in the workplace. They help workers understand that they have rights, and they provide a collective vehicle for exercising those rights. Beyond the defense and promotion of individual union members' rights, unions also provide a collective voice for workers. They provide a powerful check to the almost total power of management in the workplace. And they fight for the right of workers to participate in decision-making in the workplace.

But labor movements and other communities of common interest don't just happen. They have to be consciously constructed, with a lot of hard work, discussion and engagement. Constructing democratic communities is an ongoing process, rather like democracy. And like democracy, it's a process that can be rolled back or reversed.

The cause of unions in the 21st century United States reaches far beyond their own survival. Because we have not yet succeeded in extending democracy to the workplace, democracy and civil society themselves are threatened. The labor movement cannot be seen in isolation from the political environment, and any revitalization of unions will require an effective response to that environment. While the New Right tries to reduce everything to an individual responsibility, we must create democratic communities—in the workplace and beyond.

YDS

basic principles

We fight for a world without capitalism, a system which creates vast inequalities of wealth and power. Capitalism endangers our environment, undermines the ties which bind our communities, and promotes racial, sexual and gender oppression. In its place, we propose an economic, social and political system based on democracy and solidarity. We call this system democratic socialism.

Our mission is to educate and organize students and young people, and to play a helpful and principled role in the movement for social justice. Within and through this struggle, we will articulate and defend the idea that true human liberation is impossible under capitalism. We fight for social change which extends democracy into all aspects of life- social, political and economic. This is the fight for democratic socialism.

Our vision of socialism is profoundly democratic, feminist and anti-racist. Our commitment to these principles guides us in our political work as well as our own structure and working methods. We believe that social change must come from below, not handed down from elites.

All young people who want to work for a better world are welcome in YDS.

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This pamphlet is an edited version of "Why Unions Matter" by Elaine Bernard, and is used with her permission. The original version of the pamphlet is available at: http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/lwp/eb/whyunion.pdf
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