

Democratic Socialists of America: Analysis, Vision, and Strategy

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Edited 3/16/15

This document represents the effort by members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to present a shared worldview and a *strategy* for the organization going forward. It is divided into three sections: (1) an analysis of the capitalist system, the particular challenges radicals face in the United States, and some speculation about new challenges in the 21st century; (2), our principles and vision of an achievable democratic socialist order; and (3), our strategy regarding the transition to socialism and organizing today. Terms that may be unfamiliar or that are used idiosyncratically are listed in a glossary at the end of the document and appear in italics in the text [note: glossary to come in a future iteration]. This version is a work in progress that will go through several more rounds of edits and revisions.

Part I: Analysis

A. How Capitalism Works

Capitalism is among the most powerful forces ever unleashed by human civilization, plowing through every obstacle in its path. At the same time, it is as fragile as a house of cards — ready to be knocked down by each succeeding crisis. It has created wealth beyond the wildest dreams of the ancient emperors and yet its success throws millions into misery and degradation. It profanes everything that mortals once held sacred, while subjecting all humanity to the command of the god mammon.

Through the relentless expansion of market forces and economic organization, capitalism *socializes* everything except itself. As subsistence economies give way to production for the world market, the human race is now integrated into a single worldwide economic system. Yet because of *market exchange*, we come to see each other as means to achieving our own ends instead of as free and equal human beings with whom we interact.

Capitalism subordinates human needs and wants to the endless accumulation of profit. The value of stocks *must* rise, no matter what the costs. Every other consideration — equality, freedom, ecology, life itself — must be thrown aside to clear the path toward limitless growth. Like Dr. Frankenstein, humanity has created powerful, monstrous forces we cannot control, and they have turned against us. Steadily, but brutally, the empire of exchange is expanding its frontiers. Unstopped, it will eliminate every pocket of non-capitalist society from the face of the earth. Because we have to work to survive, the mass of people in capitalist societies must sell our labor to employers. As a result, while work under capitalism is formally free, in practice it is forced. We do not have to work for anybody, but we have to work for somebody. Because we have to take whatever job is offered (or risk poverty), workers (men, women, and children) accept wages that do not reflect the value of (measured by what consumers pay for) the goods and services we

produce. This allows economic elites to live handsomely off the backs of the workers they employ. Capitalism steadily drives to extinction all classes but two, those who own and control capital and those who work for them or who have been cast aside as useless to the system.

When and if we find employment, workers under capitalism are subject to the whims of managers, bosses, and corporate boards. Very few of us have jobs in which we can determine for ourselves what work to do and how to do it or set the pace of our own day. While at work, most of us find ourselves at the command of undemocratic hierarchies and superiors who use the threat of unemployment to steal our wages, demand sexual favors, and subject us to constant surveillance and a thousand insults and abuses.

Powerful as they may be, though, our bosses are not truly free. Even the most benevolent employers must make layoffs, slash benefits, and outsource work in order to stay competitive. Profitability overrules every other consideration as businesses must constantly adapt to new conditions, increase sales, and cut costs or perish. Instead of the economy's existing to serve humanity, all of humanity lives to serve the economy.

Beyond this, although capitalism opens the door to some freedoms not known under previous societies, in many cases it simply perpetuates or even reinforces already existing oppressive social structures that depend on race, *gender*, and other hierarchies in a new set of mutually reinforcing systems. From its birth, capitalism depended on the exploitation of underpaid labor in factories and slaves to produce the raw materials needed for the expansion of capitalist industrialization in Europe. This process simultaneously produced economic development for capitalist firms and economic underdevelopment in African societies. In the United States, even after slavery was abolished, a brutal racial caste system known as "Jim Crow" remained to ensure that African Americans would have access only to the lowest strata of the labor market, and that the fruits of their labor would go not to them but to their white employers. Similarly, since its inception, capitalism has relied on the free labor provided by women as wives, mothers, and caregivers to ensure that current workers are able to remain part of the labor force, to provide a constant supply of new entrants into the labor force, and to care for old or disabled workers who are no longer productive for their employers. This system is perpetuated by a gender hierarchy of male dominance that systematically marginalizes, objectifies, and demeans women, ensuring compliance through the constant threat of violence. Without the myriad forms of domestic and caregiving work women perform for no or low wages, capitalist growth would be severely limited. As the affluent increasingly outsource caregiving to paid employees, those working in domestic care are disproportionately highly exploited immigrants and women of color. At the same time, capitalist firms take advantage of women's subordinate social status to exploit them in the workplace, paying them less than men and offering them jobs with fewer benefits and less security.

Though these forms of domination are bound up tightly with capitalism, they are not reducible to it, and they must be directly confronted in their own right. A workers' movement for human emancipation is doomed to failure if it organizes only the relatively privileged. A united working class is not something that exists in and of itself — it must be constructed through tenacious organizing, subversion of privileges, and struggles in solidarity against the most vicious forms of

structural oppression. After all, many working-class people are women, many are not white, and many are not straight. No fight for economic interests can ignore identity. Capitalism conquered the globe using the apparatus of the *state* (that is, governments, laws, police, and militaries), and it is through the state that socialists must work to destroy it, not through violence but through strategic action. The original mass of capital was accumulated by state-organized violence and robbery. Europe's peasantry were robbed of their land and the civilizations of the Americas and Africa were subjugated and plundered for minerals and slaves. Capitalist states of Europe forced open Asian ports at gunpoint and eventually subjected nearly the entire world to direct imperial administration. But the state itself became an arena of struggle for the working class and other exploited peoples, as manifested in fights for the right to vote and civil rights and against colonialism and imperialism.

As the chasm between the rich and the poor grows, the potential becomes all the greater for building a majority in favor of abolishing the *private property* (that is, income-producing property, not personal property such as homes and cars) that fills the coffers of the rich with the wealth of the poor and replacing it with a democratic order that achieves real liberty and equality for all.

B. Challenges Specific to the United States

Michael Harrington and others often noted that any socialism that develops in the United States will be unique to the United States. We cannot import a model from abroad. If we hope to develop a *strategy* adequate to the task of advancing a politics of emancipation for the 21st century, we must first understand the dynamics that have brought us to the present and the strategic possibilities these dynamics open up for us. Of particular importance are the role of socialists in electoral politics and the role of systems of oppression based not on class but on race, gender, sexuality, nationality, immigration status, and other *identities* in limiting the development of socialist politics in the United States.

1. Electoral Politics

Socialists in the United States have viewed the two-party monopoly politics as a competitive charade, given how ideologically close the Republican and Democratic Parties have been on key economic questions. The persistence of two dominant *bourgeois* parties stems from our particular constitutional structures and an array of restrictive state laws that make third-party national efforts extraordinarily difficult. Chief among these is the herculean effort needed for parties running presidential candidates to petition to get on the ballot in 50 separate states. The law also makes it difficult for third parties to win any standing in legislative bodies by requiring an outright win in an election, a problem many other countries avoid by using systems of *proportional representation*. In addition, in the United States, even when a new party wants to endorse an existing incumbent it cannot. Just eight states allow *fusion voting*; the rest banned it to squash the insurgent Populist Party after its impressive showing in the 1896 election. Both restrictive voting rights provisions — such as voter ID laws and felon disenfranchisement — and the long-standing practice of gerrymandering districts make the work of leftist third parties much harder. Right-wing third parties, bankrolled by extremely wealthy people, have occasionally had mild electoral success nationally.

The radical Left, unanimous in its commitment to creating an anti-corporate voting bloc, has often been deeply divided over the question of how to relate to the two dominant parties and third party efforts. Today the voting bases of the two parties are distinct, with the Republicans receiving more than 90 percent of their vote from whites and the Democrats still having a base among communities of color and trade union activists. The Republicans are more openly aggressive in pushing anti-labor legislation (such as right to work laws) and voting restrictions against communities of color than Democrats, and therefore nearly all socialists view the Democratic Party, and particularly its progressive wing, as the “lesser evil.” However, when the Left poses no threat to moderate Democrats, the party leadership takes the votes of progressive constituencies for granted and presses forward with policies that serve their corporate backers. This dilemma has led socialists to disagree about the best approach to electoral work. Should we fight to elect centrist Democrats against viciously reactionary Republicans, support truly left-wing Democrats against neoliberals in primaries, or build an independent electoral base for explicit socialists?

This is, at bottom, a *tactical* question, not a philosophical one, although it has split many sections of the Left. The last time an insurgent party successfully won a spot in a new two-party system was when an offshoot from a split within one of the two major parties, the Whigs, merged with radical groups to form the anti-slavery Republican Party in the mid-19th century. All of the major realignments thereafter have occurred when powerful social movements working both inside and outside the major parties succeeded in reorienting American politics. We should rule out neither tactic on principle; we should look instead to the lessons of history to guide our course into the future.

2. *Race, Gender, and the Welfare State*

White racist elites’ control of the Democratic Party in the South, from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 through 1965 meant that people of color were largely excluded from the benefits that the New Deal and G.I. Bill brought to the white working class. For instance, Social Security — itself a major step toward the *public provision* of retirement income — was designed to benefit industrial workers in urban areas and exclude rural blacks, farm workers, domestic workers, and federal employees. The result was a two-tiered welfare system, putting into law a primary and secondary labor force, a status that has divided working people ever since. Full-time white male workers, with a steady history of employment, garnered the benefits of Social Security, the labor protections of the New Deal, and unemployment benefits. To this day, these top-tier welfare benefits are viewed as “earned” and just, because almost all workers pay into them, even though not all workers benefit from them. On the other hand, women, agricultural, and domestic workers were not only largely excluded from these programs, they could only access anti-poverty programs based on need such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), often cruelly administered by racist state governments and seen by taxpayers as “unearned.” Again, these were programs into which every worker paid, but they were not presented as “universal.”

In the 1960s, powerful emancipatory social movements called for civil rights, power to marginalized groups, and cultural transformation. African American resistance inspired other communities of color to demand an end to discrimination, the honoring of treaties with native

tribes, better treatment of migrant and immigrant labor, and political power. Women saw a parallel between racism and what came to be identified as "sexism" or systemic, structural inequality between men and women. Lesbians and gay men first demanded rights to equal treatment; they and feminists then moved on to question the nature of gender itself, the ways that U.S. society divided people into categories of men and women that allowed only limited and rigidly defined roles and behaviors. People with disabilities challenged their lack of access and the assumptions that defined them as deficient. These movements and others were based on *identity* — the notion that a person comes to see her/himself through experiences of, for example, gender, nationality, race/ethnicity, dis/ability, religious affiliation, and so on. Identity-based social movements raised important questions of unequal distribution of power within movements for change as well as in our wider society. They pointed out how claims to universality often masked the fact that some groups' particular interests were being presented as universal. At the same time, economic elites used (and continue to use) identity-based arguments to divide the rest of us, pitting one identity-based constituency against another.

This divide-and-conquer technique produced a particularly limited and vulnerable expansion of the welfare state during the 1960s. Tragically, with the exceptions of Medicare and Social Security expansion, the anti-poverty programs of the Great Society were based on need. Only families with incomes below the poverty line could access Medicaid, Food Stamps, and an expanded AFDC program. When the Left failed to win truly universal health care and childcare support programs, the Right used the justifiable resentment of people working just above the income threshold for such programs to create a backlash. The Right turned this anger not against corporate America, but in a consciously racist and gendered way against poor women of color and children. President Ronald Reagan's attack on alleged "welfare queens" stands as a low point in such attacks. President Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party, rather than defending poor people — and the expansion of these child support programs to all — enacted "welfare reform" legislation in 1996 that has brought mass poverty to millions of single mothers with infant children.

C. Challenges Worldwide

Global capitalism links us in the United States to others — those struggling to defend *social democracy*, workers in the global South, and inhabitants of a planet threatened by climate change.

1. Neoliberalism and the Decline of Social Democracy

Beginning in the 1970s, social democrats had to contend with the ascent of *neoliberalism*. Neoliberalism is a revival of classical liberalism's focus on removing restrictions on both individuals and the economy, not to be confused with present day U.S. liberalism, which is associated with balancing individual rights with government provision of a social safety net. Neoliberalism is a multifaceted political project to increase the power of economic elites by destroying institutions of worker power (unions), privatizing state functions, deregulating businesses, expanding the role of finance and financial markets, cutting taxes on the rich and corporations (so as to justify slashing spending on social programs), propelling investment in

developing countries by transnational corporations, and massively increasing the repressive functions of the state.

In the roughly 30 years following the Second World War, high rates of economic growth were made possible by the destruction of vast amounts of wealth during the war and, for the United States, by the absence of global competition. This high growth allowed both a strong *welfare state* and large profits. In the 1970s, this “golden age” ended, exacerbated by the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, the oil embargo of the 1970s, and the militancy of working people who were advancing more and more radical demands. With profitability and investment collapsing, the postwar order became unsustainable. The only question was whether the new economic model would take the path toward socialism or toward a new form of capitalism.

The answer was not long in coming. Although a few countries did try to move toward socialism (most notably, Chile, Sweden, and France), these efforts failed in varying degrees because of a combination of poor strategic planning and a massive, multifaceted offensive launched by the capitalist classes. Starting in the 1970s, capitalists began to spend enormous amounts to lobby for lower taxes on corporations and the wealthy, pulverize labor protections and the power of unions, and impose austerity by slashing public spending and defunding the welfare state. They also mounted an intellectual public relations campaign against collective decision-making bodies of all kinds — from trade unions to democratic governments — as inefficient and a threat to the free choices of individuals. In the United States, neoliberals' attacks on poverty programs and unions were fueled by a vicious, racialized campaign to stigmatize the “undeserving” poor and were accompanied by a brutal politics of policing and incarceration to repress poor black and Latino communities. These efforts were very successful in the United States, Great Britain, and Latin America and to a large degree in Western Europe. Across the global North, wage earners' income and purchasing power stagnated, while the wealth of the superrich soared. Millions of well-paid and previously secure jobs disappeared, exported to lower wage regions of the world or reduced to contingency and precariousness. The jobs that remained were increasingly part-time, dead-end, low-pay, and of course, non-union.

Neoliberals also shaped the rules of regional trade and investment through the North American Free Trade Agreement, the European Union, and the World Trade Organization, placing severe restrictions on governments' abilities to maintain high labor and environmental standards that were in conflict with corporate interests.

Despite what looks like a victory of the new world order that obeys the demands of corporate capital, there are signs of the inherent contradictions that always afflict capitalism. In 1997, the Asian financial crisis reminded us that asset price bubbles (where speculative trading inflates the selling price of an asset, like housing, to absurd levels) always burst, and the only question is, “Who will pay?” So far, it has been taxpayers. Congress repealed most of the remaining legal constraints imposed on finance and once unchained, hedge funds and the ballooning shadow banking sector proceeded to intensify the housing bubble. Finance created the varied and sundry instruments that drove the financial panic of 2008.

If current trends continue, we can expect a deepening of the contradictions of capitalism and a return to the dramatic inequality we saw in the *Gilded Age* of the 19th century.

2. *A Global Working Class*

Neoliberal capitalism is creating the first truly global political economy, seeking to gather all nations and peoples in its grasp. But in this world system, as in national political economies, not all are equal. In the three decades from 1980 through 2010, the world's working class increased by two-thirds, as more than 1.2 billion new workers were sucked into the market for labor, their ability to work turned into a commodity — something bought and sold on the market. Most of these new working-class members are in Asia, Africa, and South America, and most are poor and endure high levels of exploitation simply in order to survive. In Europe and North America, the post-war welfare states and unions have been viciously attacked, and their peoples are feeling the whip of austerity formerly reserved for developing nations.

A small and extremely wealthy group of capitalists now controls as much wealth as the lower half of the entire global population combined. More important for our future struggles, this elite increasingly sees itself as an international ruling class not limited by the ties and loyalties of national identity and interests. The World Economic Forum is the public face of this new elite. Corporate boardrooms, the offices of finance ministries, the closed-door negotiating sessions for “trade” agreements are the scenes where they make decisions that have grave public consequences for humanity.

Whether this international elite can truly transcend national interests is yet to be determined. What we do know is that the struggle against their wealth and power must itself transcend national boundaries.

3. *Capitalism and the Climate Crisis*

One of the most alarming trends produced by capitalism is the accelerating disruption of the global climate. The “satanic mills” of early industrialization, which spewed filth into the air now circle the globe in forms unimaginable to our forebears. Today, the percentage of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is rising to a level incompatible with maintaining a sustainable environment on earth.

The rapid and drastic reduction in carbon emissions requires major public investments in renewable energies and infrastructures that are too unprofitable for capitalist market forces to develop. The underlying logic of capitalism, which requires bigger and bigger profits, requires more and more extraction of fossil fuels or else reliance on nuclear energy. Only rebuilding *the commons* through extensive public planning coordinated at local, national, and global levels can cancel out the damages already inflicted on the planet.

Capitalists with the most at stake use their immense wealth to buy politicians' loyalty and fund think tanks and right-wing organizations that deny the reality of disruptive climate change. The technologies we need will either be developed by governments acting in the public interest or not at all. Neoliberal policies such as “cap and trade” do not challenge the underlying logic behind environmental destruction; “market-based solutions” is truly an oxymoron.

D. Beyond Neoliberalism?

In the 21st century, technological change will likely reduce the amount of tasks that need to be done with human labor. But what should be a gigantic step forward for satisfying human needs will be treated by capitalists as a threat to profitability and will lead to massive unemployment. If capitalist class power remains supreme, increased automation and efficiency will swell the numbers of the permanently unemployed, and intellectual property law will become an increasingly important tool in maintaining the artificial scarcity necessary to charge fees for abundant goods. If this process continues, the gap between rich and poor would balloon, and inequality would come to rely increasingly on brute force for its preservation. In order to protect themselves from public fury, economic elites would retreat to gated communities guarded by private security forces, while the masses would be confined to immense walled-off ghettos under the steadily more despotic control of militarized police and weaponized drone security forces. The incarcerated population would explode, and even free life would come to resemble a prison camp for the masses of property-less poor.

The 21st century could be very bleak indeed. But the game is not over. We still have an immense amount of power to change the course of human civilization. We have the largest working class in history. Organizing it for the Left requires an optimism of the will, a pessimism of the intellect, and dedication over the long haul. Whereas the communists of the 19th century could only speak about the workers of Europe and North America, in the 21st century the task is truly to unite the workers of the world.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, Occupy Wall Street has brought class and inequality back into American political discussion. Anti-austerity politics have gained steam in union struggles; struggles of low-wage service sector workers have intensified; fights to raise the minimum wage to a living wage have proliferated; and explicit socialists are succeeding electorally at the local level. The rise of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain has opened a new front in the fight for a different future.

If we continue to build on this organizing, we can transform our society. The choice stands clearly before us: chaos or community. The future is ours to decide.

Part II: Vision

As democratic socialists we are part of a venerable U.S. tradition of visionaries — religious, utopian, Marxist — who have been on the frontlines of struggles for justice. We are the honored torchbearers who carry this legacy and create a future based on it.

A. Why Democratic Socialism: Our Core Principles

The fight for democratic socialism is the fight for radical democracy, which we understand as the freedom of all people to determine the course of their own lives to the greatest extent possible. Such self determination means the radical democratization of all areas of life, not least of which is the economy.

Under capitalism, we are supposed to accept as natural the idea that a small, largely unaccountable group of directors should make all fundamental decisions about how an economic enterprise made up of thousands of people should be run; that unelected corporate managers should have the power to determine how most of us spend the majority of our waking hours; and that these managers should be able to fire someone from a job for any reason, however arbitrary. It is a glaring contradiction of the liberal ideology that political institutions are seen as legitimate when they are controlled democratically, but economic institutions are seen as legitimate when they are run as dictatorships. This contradiction can be overcome in a socialist society that gives people a say not only over who represents them in government but over all other significant decisions that affect their lives.

As democratic socialists, we believe that economic exploitation cuts across all other forms of oppression, and therefore that economic democracy would dramatically enhance most people's capacity for self-determination. However, we do not believe racial, gender, sexual, and other forms of oppression are reducible to economic exploitation. In addition to challenging economic exploitation, the socialist project entails addressing myriad other limits in politics, culture, and society that narrow people's capacity for self-determination (such as gender, racial, and sexual oppression).

Democracy is an intrinsically fragile system that does not produce total social harmony. Navigating between the competing claims of different groups in society will persist even in the most successful socialist society, so we should be forever wary of attempts by even the most well-meaning radicals to speak in the name of others or to exclude a segment of the population from the rights enjoyed by the rest of society on the basis of their political beliefs.

Our analysis of capitalism sets us apart from liberals and social democrats. Liberals conceive of political and civil rights (including the right to vote, and freedom of speech and assembly) as being distinct from economic and social rights (such as the right to a decent education, good health care, and democracy in the workplace). We believe, to the contrary, that civil and political rights are only as good as the capacity of individuals to exercise these rights, which depends on the economic and social rights they enjoy. Too many social democrats believe that a compromise between the capitalist class and the masses of exploited and oppressed people can be sustained in the long-term. We believe, in contrast, that capitalism inherently destroys egalitarian social relations and that genuine public control over society's resources is the only way to guarantee freedom for all. Social democrats and socialists mobilized to create the political and working-class power that won major gains in labor and social rights in much of the capitalist world in the 20th century, and we need to rebuild that power. But the backlash of neoliberalism it provoked demonstrates that such gains can never be fully secured unless we make the transition to full democratic socialism. Both liberals and social democrats generally accept a conception of a profit-driven economy that is fundamentally incompatible with a sustainable vision of human development.

There are several important reasons why we, as democratic socialists, must have a coherent vision of the society we wish to see. First, the terror of communist regimes and the failures of technocratic social-democratic parties to sustain their gains have left many people with distorted

ideas of what democratic socialism is. We must clarify how our vision of socialism differs from the popular misconceptions. Second, in a period of horrific inequality and neoliberal hegemony we must present a plausible, achievable, and inspiring vision of a socialist society. Last, and perhaps most important, without a clear sense of how our long-term objectives differ from those of liberals and progressives, we stand little chance of sparking the passion and imagination of potential members of DSA. We must convince them that committing their time to socialist activism is preferable to working primarily with other organizations whose resources and political influence vastly exceed our own. For these reasons, in the sections below we lay out a sketch of DSA's vision of socialism, from the economy to politics, from culture to law.

B. Socialist Economy in the United States

A realistic and achievable socialist economic system would take the economy out of the hands of capitalists and government bureaucrats and place it in the hands of the people. Our vision describes a beginning from which further radical transformations and technological innovations could advance us toward an even more free and equal society. This is a sketch. The fuller picture will be drawn by the people who are affected.

Workplace democracy would be at the center of a socialist economy. The abolition of private property (that is, large enterprises) would replace the hierarchical structure of the corporate firm with the democratic self-management by workers. Enterprises would be organized as democratic communities. In some cases firms might be owned by the workers themselves (worker cooperatives). In nationalized industries, where "ownership" would be in the hands of the public as a whole, workers would elect their managers from among their own ranks. Because various subsections of workers in a firm may disagree on some issues, independent labor unions would remain necessary to ensure that everyone's voice is heard. To ensure the protection of the greater social good, worker-run firms would be subject to regulation, oversight, and intervention by democratically elected authorities.

Economic democracy would replace not only the despotism of the capitalist firm, but also the anarchy of the capitalist market. Geographically based public investment banks or democratically chosen planning bodies at the local, state, and federal level would put the mass of working people at the helm of economic life. Consideration of the public good would replace the profit motive in directing investments into new technologies and enterprises. These banks or planning authorities would have a mandate to guarantee full employment, and they would direct a massive amount of resources into developing renewable energy and efficient technologies to restore ecological stability and a healthy environment. We would invest heavily in public transportation and prioritize developing technologies and practices that can produce more food with less land in a healthy and sustainable manner.. Doing so would allow us to put newly freed land to use as national parks and nature preserves. With investment in the hands of the democratic community, we would finally organize our economy according to the slogan "people, not profit."

The precise role of markets in a socialist society is a matter of ongoing debate within DSA. Some would nationalize natural monopolies and essential services (such as utilities, transportation, health, and education), while leaving ownership of most firms in the hands of workers

themselves, with regulated markets for labor, credit, and consumer goods. Within bounds set by democratic public oversight, worker-owned firms would have ample room to determine their own investment strategies. Other DSAers argue that socialism would mean abolishing all markets and transcending competition entirely. Doing so would entail issuing credits to workers for the labor they performed, instead of money wages. These credits could be traded in for goods at rates set by democratically elected planning boards that would oversee cooperative production and distribution between firms. Regardless of the extent to which we think markets should or should not be utilized in a socialist economy, however, all DSAers agree that one of the primary objectives of any socialist economic system would be to include citizens to the greatest extent possible in decision-making processes about the production and distribution of goods and services.

In a socialist society, the basic necessities of life would be considered economic rights to which all citizens would be entitled. Vital services such as health care, education, child care, elder care, and transportation would be provided by the state — the federal government — to each citizen on demand and free of charge. In addition to public services and wages (either in the form of money or credits), socialism would also offer a universal basic income. This income would not replace but exist alongside expanded programs of unemployment, disability, and retirement benefits. The introduction of a basic income would be accompanied by the gradual reduction of the workweek, expanded vacation time and family leave, the extension of formal schooling to include higher education for all, and the lowering of the retirement age. As technological innovation leads to the reduced necessity of many forms of labor, these reforms would be necessary to ensure that everyone is able to enjoy the fruits of abundance and leisure.

However, in the early period of socialism, many kinds of work widely considered undesirable would still remain necessary. Whereas capitalism forces the poorest and most vulnerable to fill these jobs for low pay or often, in the case of housework and care work, no pay at all, socialism would distribute menial work justly. One solution would be to encourage people to take these jobs with economic incentives, in the form, say, of more money/credits or vacation time than for other work. Another would be to institute a one to two year universal work requirement, during which everyone would be called upon to use their varied skills in high-quality community service upon reaching adulthood, ensuring that each citizen shared the burden equally. In either case, the jobs that few people find fulfilling should be prioritized for automation, so that we can increasingly devote our lives to doing work that engages our capacities for creativity and cultivates our diverse potentials as productive individuals.

C. Socialist Political System in the United States

In a socialist society, the political system of the United States would be reformed to protect a much stronger set of individual rights, shrink unaccountable bureaucracies and military and police forces, and dramatically expand the role of average citizens in shaping government policies.

In our contemporary capitalist society, many of the individual civil and political rights promised by our Constitution are routinely violated, including freedom of assembly, press, and speech, among others. With the advent of socialism, security institutions such as the National Security

Administration, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation would either be dramatically downsized or dismantled, the use of surveillance would cease, and the police and prison system would be dramatically reduced in size and power. Immediate citizenship would be available to anyone subject to the laws of the country, and a robust set of rights — including the right to vote — would be guaranteed to everyone living within our borders, regardless of legal status. Both democratic politics and a well-functioning socialist economic system rely on the work of a genuinely free press, and therefore a certain portion of public resources would be dedicated to supporting independent journalism and news outlets that encourage free debate and dissent. A robust right of free association, coupled with increased leisure time, should encourage a wide range of genuinely autonomous social and political organizations outside the state that offer a check on concentrated power and open up spaces for a wide diversity of opinions and identities.

With basic needs taken care of and more leisure time available, people would be able to participate more in decisions that affect their lives through institutions of direct democracy.

These institutions would take different forms depending on the size of the community. General assemblies at the neighborhood level similar to New England town meetings, citizen boards for various government services, program councils made up of those who receive services, municipal and state assemblies offer avenues for direct and representational democracy. In addition, referenda around key political issues would be used at the local, state, and federal level (without current distortions of the process by wealthy individuals) as another means of direct citizen participation in political decision making. Taken together, these measures would guarantee that average people could enjoy a chance to shape directly the laws under which they live.

While direct democracy would be greatly expanded in socialist politics, *representative democracy* (a system with elected legislatures that are given authority to make decisions on behalf of a given constituency) would still have an important role to play. Despite having much more leisure time, many people may choose to prioritize other endeavors over regular participation in direct-democratic political institutions. For true democracy to exist, it is essential to have a less demanding option through which citizens could register their political preferences. That said, elections for representative institutions would take a different form in socialist politics than they do now: term limits would be shorter, citizens would have the power of instant recall, and a new voting system would be introduced that would grant parties legislative seats in proportion to their share of the vote, allowing for more than two parties to be viable forces in government.

In a socialist government, the power of legislatures would be expanded relative to the power of mayors, governors, and judges. In lieu of the U.S. Senate, we could either have a single, radically reformed House of Representatives or add a second chamber in the form of a citizen's assembly, the members of which would be chosen by lottery from among the entire adult population (much as jury members are chosen today). Similar citizen assemblies could be incorporated into the structure of state and municipal legislatures, thus adding another mechanism of direct democracy into the political system. Such reforms of representative democracy, coupled with robust forms of direct democracy, would take us much closer to the ideal of government by the people.

Further, in a socialist political system, all citizens would have equal political rights, in contrast to the current situation of millions of U.S. citizens, such as the residents of the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, our overseas territories, and Native American tribes. Or, these communities would be given the option to develop their own political communities.

E. Socialist Legal System

A socialist legal system would also entail some important innovations. For example, citizen review boards of both the police and court systems would be developed and vested with significant authority. In addition, the use of prisons to regulate behavior would be replaced in most cases with a system that combined restorative justice, mental health care, and various forms of counseling to help people find constructive ways to move forward in the wake of serious crimes. As many so-called non-violent crimes aimed at various populations are decriminalized, the need for prisons will decline.

E. Socialist Society and Culture

Although much of the material basis for racial and ethnic oppression will be removed with the abolition of private property, it will continue to be necessary to enforce anti-discrimination policies in the workplace and in social organizations until the revolution in social equality has taken hold. The social conventions that reproduce the privileges of white skin would be deliberately dismantled, and institutions of culture in the United States would be transformed to include everyone. The history books would tell the story of the United States as seen from the perspective of those who challenged oppression, rather than those who caused it. Full racial, ethnic, and cultural equality is an uncompromising commitment of socialist politics.

Further, the socialist revolution must also be a sexual and gender revolution. Economic security must be guaranteed to all individuals independent of their social relationships. Through deliberate policies (such as paid parental leave with no retribution at the workplace) and social movement activism, the dominance of heterosexual gender roles and norms would recede into history, and each individual's development would become a matter of their own free choice. As social conventions change, any sort of toy, any manner of dress, any line of work, and any reproductive choices that do not involve exploitation of another person would be opened up to anyone regardless of the kind of body they have. A wide variety of gender and sexual orientations would be open to all individuals and celebrated as a cherished part of an increasingly free and queer society.

It is important to remember that race- and gender-based identities give many people a deep sense of meaning and belonging; they are not simply coping mechanisms for dealing with life under capitalism. A given identity may have developed under conditions of oppression, but it can and often has played a positive role in peoples' lives in a free and equal society. We all have multiple identities. Once the economic factors that exacerbate non-class-based forms of oppression have disappeared, we can shift from a world of stratification based on imposed identities to one of diverse, freely chosen identities limited only by principles of mutual respect and the absence of exploitation.

A shorter workweek would free up time, which could go toward spending time with family and friends, engaging in politics, pursuing higher education, experimenting in new lifestyles, and applying our creativity to the world of art, music, and culture. Beyond that, art and cultural production in a socialist society would be thoroughly *decommodified*: artists, musicians, and performers would receive resources to pursue their work, and a new era of cultural renaissance and human flourishing would begin.

A socialist society would be a society in which humanity's relationship to nature would be dramatically altered. Instead of viewing the natural world as nothing more than a servant to be exploited, we would finally see ourselves as part of the natural world. We would limit our impact on the rest of the natural world and develop new modes of living that allow us to integrate human society more organically into the rest of our global environment. Our cities would be filled with parks and trees, and much of our rural land would be returned to wilderness, both for the sake of cultivating a healthy ecosystem and for our enjoyment of wildlife and the beauty of nature.

F. Socialist World

While the socialist society envisioned above has dealt specifically with the United States alone, a globalized capitalism must be replaced with an international socialism. Socialism in the United States can only be secured by the success of socialism in the rest of the world, and the political and economic institutions created at the national level must be paired with democratic organization at the global level. World democratic socialism would mean a level of international cooperation and integration impossible under the imperialist drives of capitalism.

Institutions of democratic planning would be created at the regional and global level, coordinating and directing the cooperative energies of many interdependent economies as a whole. Demilitarization would free up a tremendous amount of resources across the globe that could be redirected toward building infrastructure, curbing climate change, improving living standards, and exploring outer space. As one of the wealthiest nations in the world, the United States would take a major role in distributing resources to developing regions. In addition to ending poverty and equalizing development, one of the main goals of this international system should be the reversal of global warming through the development of renewable energy sources and safe and efficient technologies for regulating the earth's atmosphere and ecosystems.

Instead of war, we would have peace; instead of competition, cooperation; instead of exploitation, equality; instead of pollution, sustainability; and instead of domination, freedom. Life would still have sorrows as well as joys. There would still be failed projects and unrequited love. But with world socialism, there would no longer be suffering imposed upon us by institutions over which we have no control.

Part III: Socialist Strategy for the 21st Century

We have discussed the circumstances that have led us to the present, the opportunities open to us in the coming years, and the type of society for which we fight. We turn now to the most

fundamental question of all: What is to be done? Answering this question requires a strategy: a long-term plan for how to build the social forces necessary to challenge capitalism and a concept of how socialism could be achieved. What routes might a transition to socialism take? What key strategic choices do socialist organizers face today?

A. Transition to Democratic Socialism

Neoliberalism has given rise to rampant inequality, economic stagnation, and a radical decrease in working-class living standards. As a result, parts of Latin America and southern Europe have witnessed the rebirth of mass socialist movements, and in some countries these movements have even captured political power. Although such developments are a promising start, these countries remain far from socialist societies. Additionally, because socialism is impossible in one country, the transition to socialism will necessitate the building of strong socialist parties and social movements everywhere. Building solidarity among working people across these disparate countries with often conflicting material interests will not be easy, but it remains absolutely essential.

The transition to socialism in our interdependent, exceedingly complex global economy is unlikely to occur in one cataclysmic moment when the *means of production* are instantly transferred from capitalist to popular control. Rather, the fight for democratic control of production, cultural life, and socialized provision of health care, and so on will likely be the result of sustained political, economic, and social struggles over the course of several decades both before and after socialists gain political power. To achieve such a transition, socialists will have to devise a strategy to build democratic social movements, socialist political parties, and democratically controlled trade unions powerful enough to wrest control of society from capitalist oligarchs.

This strategy will focus on changes in state policy that shift the balance of power from capital to working people. In the short to medium term, this means enacting strong living-wage ordinances; expanding the power of worker institutions (both unions and non-traditional forms of worker organization) through worker representation on corporate boards; defending through stronger legislation the right to unionization; decreasing the hours of the work week and reducing the age of retirement; providing a basic income for all citizens; decommodifying health care; providing parental leave, child and elder care, and free higher education. It also means expanding such processes as participatory budgeting (in which assemblies of ordinary citizens participate directly in decision making about government spending) and worker-owned and worker-operated cooperatives, which serve both to democratize spheres of capitalist society and to give people a clearer picture of what the radically democratic socialist society we seek would look like. More generally, in the short to medium term socialists must work to contest the “common sense” of capitalist culture — ideas of “consumer sovereignty,” “individual freedom,” and “individual choice” that permeate schools and the media. In contrast to the competitive, individualist notion of capitalist freedom, which uses the pretense of merit to justify the rule of an elite few, socialists offer a cultural vision of democratic freedom in which individuals fulfill their unique human potential by participating in a free and democratic community.

Once socialist parties either gain legislative majorities on their own or become powerful enough within a larger progressive coalition to press for more radical reforms, they will confront the power of capital through reforms that serve to fundamentally transform — over time — the capitalist economy into a socialist one. These measures are sometimes referred to as “non-reformist reforms” or “transformative reforms.” They could include nationalization of key industries, decommodifying an even wider range of basic goods, buying out private firms and handing control of these firms to the workers who run them, and a host of other transformations outlined in the previous section.

This strategy is by no means utopian. In the 1970s through the early 1980s, democratic socialist governments had the strength to radically expand labor rights and provide for basic needs as well as to nationalize key industries and create worker-controlled investment funds that would eventually buy out capitalist stakes in companies. Capital fought back viciously against such gains, usually by a capital strike that included capital flight, inducing an economic downturn through raising prices, and refusing to invest. In some cases, socialist governments lost political support and were voted out of office or they moved away from these radical reforms. In other cases, capitalists allied with the military and foreign powers such as the United States to topple the socialist government by force.

It is at the point when capitalists use their considerable economic leverage in society to put an end to socialist reforms that socialists face the most difficult choices. They can either stay the course or capitulate. And if they stay the course, they have to do so without endangering the population and opening the way to military dictatorships. History shows us examples of both, and none of them are appealing. Without majority support, the only way to forge ahead would be to institute a period of revolutionary dictatorship by a governing minority, which would betray our fundamental commitment to democracy (and has been shown historically to be counterproductive). Even with majority support, we would have to be able to block violence from abroad or within without betraying our principles. The only solution for democratic socialists is to find a way to sustain broad-based political support for socialism — including within the rank-and-file of the police and armed forces as well as in the international community — that would remain strong even in the face of short-term economic sacrifices. Such support can be achieved by building a mass-based culture of democratic education, participation, and debate, through which a majority of the population comes to see socialist transformation as the only route to democracy, equality, and freedom. If we hope to develop a convincing strategy for socialism in the 21st century, we must think carefully about how we would overcome the many profound challenges socialists in power have faced in the past.

B. What Is To Be Done?

We are socialists at a time when our movement is small but growing, here and around the world. Despite this fact, the possibility of a transition to democratic socialism — especially in the United States — appears remote. We are democratic socialists because we believe that we can and must build a better social order. Consequently we must develop a strategy that will allow us to be successful in short-term struggles while at the same time moving us closer to a democratic socialist future.

1. Community Organizing and Anti-Oppression Coalition Building

The strength of our movement must come from appreciating and celebrating our differences as much as from unity against the ruling class. We understand our mutual interests and therefore struggle against all forms of oppression.

White supremacy is a vicious structure of human domination that infects us all at the level of our interpersonal relationships as well as our economy and government. Any organization interested in freedom and equality must confront it head on. The rich and powerful have mobilized racial politics to divide and conquer poor and working people. Today the Right argues that progressive tax policy and universal health care and child care programs — which almost all other capitalist democracies have — are unfair forms of redistribution from the “makers” (white “entrepreneurs”) to the “takers” (implicitly indolent people of color, the “moochers”). Thus, democratic socialist strategy in the United States focuses in particular upon the fight against the New Jim Crow. This form of American apartheid excludes large segments of communities of color (as well as many working-class and poor whites) from mainstream civic life through mass unemployment and mass incarceration. To that end, democratic socialists are deeply engaged in a range of movements and coalitions led by activists of color. These include struggles against unjust police violence and neighborhood, educational and workforce segregation, as well as the movement for greater community control of the police. We are also engaged in activism that works to build alternatives to poverty and mass incarceration, such as the fights for quality public education, public jobs, job training programs, an increased minimum wage, and a reduction of the retirement age and workweek to create full employment.

Democratic socialists’ analysis and practice highlights the role that sexism and homophobia have played and continue to play in reproducing forms of gender, sexual, racial, and class hierarchy. Thus, the fight for public provision of childcare and universal health care, including quality reproductive health services for all, is central to a socialist coalition strategy. Further, we understand that systemic forms of violence — and the threat of violence — preclude women, people of color, LGBTQ folks, and others from having the security of person needed to lead truly free lives. Thus, democratic socialists participate in the anti-corporate wings of movements for racial, gender, and sexual liberation.

Democratic socialists believe that all who are subject to our country’s laws should have immediate rights as citizens. Thus we join the immigrant rights movement in the fight for an immediate and expeditious path to citizenship for all undocumented peoples.

Often we can make the greatest impact in our neighborhoods through community organizing. Democratic participation within community organizations is one of the best weapons against neoliberal cutbacks and profit-driven injustice. Community organizing is essential in the struggle against climate change and abuses of our common environment, particularly because poor communities suffer the most from pollution and natural disasters.

2. Labor Organizing

As socialists, we see democratic unionism as an extension of democratic rights into the workplace and the beginning of the kind of cooperative work that should characterize all of society, and we see the power of an organized working class as an essential component of socialist strategy. We recognize, however, that unions are weaker than they have been in a century, and the trajectory looks grim.

Rebuilding the labor movement will certainly entail strengthening and growing existing unions. Even in a globalized economy, there are many important industries that will remain in the United States and that can be organized (for example, healthcare, retail, and education). DSAers active in the labor movement as rank-and-file activists and staffers will continue to push for more rank-and-file engagement within unions, as a more active membership means a stronger and more assertive union movement, and we will continue to campaign for labor law reform, particularly, to win a robust protection for the rights to organize and strike. We will also encourage members to become rank-and-file activists, rather than professional organizers, as we believe this is the best way for socialists to push the labor movement in a more democratic direction. Socialists can make a much larger contribution to creating a democratic labor movement in the workplace than as members of the labor bureaucracy.

DSA will also increase our support of different forms of labor organizing outside of the *model of collective bargaining* put in place by the National Labor Relations Act, such as raising the minimum wage, building minority unions (voluntary union formations that negotiate with management even absent majority membership), growing worker centers, and supporting organizations in the immigrant rights movement.

In campaigns such as these, and as rank-and-file union activists, we have considerable opportunities to focus on our socialist politics and to retain some independence from other progressive organizations. Without this independence, we lose the capacity not only to be a critical voice within larger progressive movements but also to strengthen the socialist movement.

3. Education and Student Organizing

One of our primary areas of struggle is the fight for free, high quality education for all. Though charter schools, credit swaps, and other blatant money-making schemes, neoliberal privatizers work to convert public schools into profit centers. The defunding of public colleges and the increasing exploitation of adjunct and ancillary staff in both private and public universities will likely continue if neoliberal cuts in state funding of higher education cannot be reversed. Unions and student organizations have real possibilities to do just that, which would address both the student debt crisis and the needs of the *precariat* (used here to mean adjuncts, but describing under-employed, under-paid workers in all fields) created by today's higher education model. Organizing around student debt and against the privatization of education, including non-tenured staff exploitation, is a long-term priority.

Students have long been among the loudest voices calling for socialism, and this is truer than ever now thanks to the rise of student debt and the increasing need to take part-time jobs to pay for schooling. We will continue to prioritize organizing on both high school and college campuses to provide an anti-capitalist analysis and socialist alternatives that are absent from

other progressive student activism. In addition to this essential work, such organizing prepares the future leaders of DSA and the socialist movement more generally. To build a space for this work, DSA will continue to work with students on their pressing needs and provide a space for their activism post-graduation.

4. Participating in Elections

Currently, most DSA locals put a higher priority on social movement organizing and public political education than on electoral politics. Nevertheless, DSA recognizes that electoral politics must be an important part of our strategy, as the question of who holds state power profoundly affects people's lives, particularly those of the most vulnerable (who rarely have the time to attend organizing or educational meetings).

Some in DSA believe that the U.S. electoral system is so stacked against third parties that socialists must work primarily within the Democratic Party. Doing so means supporting both centrist Democrats against politicians of the far Right whose election would spell disaster for working-class people, as well as supporting progressive Democratic candidates, particularly in primary elections, whose victories would grow the strength of progressive electoral forces and hopefully open up a space for socialist politics within the Democratic Party. These DSAers believe that this work could eventually produce a shift to the left in the Democratic Party or a split in the party that could lead to the formation of a new, potentially majoritarian progressive party.

Others in DSA assert that the structure of the Democratic Party will prevent leftists from working effectively within it, and they argue that a new party for socialism must eventually be built. DSAers holding this perspective believe that, wherever feasible, we should focus on supporting explicitly socialist candidates running either as independents or within Democratic primaries. Those holding this perspective argue that, regardless of short-term tactical considerations, DSA's electoral work should be oriented toward the long-term goal of building an independent socialist political party.

Both perspectives are well represented in DSA and both concur that DSA's electoral work must be aimed, at least in part, at increasing our capacity for independent socialist political action. Both agree that at present running explicitly socialist candidates will be most feasible in contests for local office that occur either in districts where one of the two major parties predominates or in nonpartisan races. Finally, both agree that one of DSA's goals is to build locals — and local leaders — who are sufficiently experienced and rooted in their communities that they can run as viable explicitly socialist candidates, whether within or without the Democratic Party.

5. Organizing in the International Arena

Although we will inevitably focus most of our attention on domestic politics, a socialist strategy for the 21st century must of necessity take the global context into account. As democratic socialists, we stand in solidarity with and will build deeper ties to organizations and movements around the world that are fighting against the neoliberal agenda. This includes leftist political parties and left tendencies within social-democratic parties who stand up to the neoliberal

consensus in their countries; highly exploited workers who fight against their domination by autocratic governments and multinational corporations; and oppressed nationalities struggling for self-determination, such as the Palestinians, the Kurds, and the Uyghurs, among others.

We will also participate in the climate justice movement against the devastation wreaked by global capitalism on the most vulnerable people and cultures on the globe. We support the struggles of indigenous peoples against the plundering of their fossil fuel and forest resources, against the life-destroying polluted air and water in Asian cities, and the negligent attitude shown by the global north towards black and brown communities around the world who are impacted by the violent storms, floods and famines caused by global warming. Our mutual struggle against the neoliberal capitalist system that is destroying the lives and livelihoods of peoples all over the planet is at the same time an investment in the viable future of our own society, itself threatened by the consequences of fossil-fueled global warming.

Finally, we must also struggle with working-class people from around the world to democratize international financial organizations and redirect them to promote economic and social policies that benefit those who suffer the costs of global capitalism. Such policies would include increased public spending on health care for the uninsured, worker retraining, adequate pensions, and so on. An international *financial transaction tax* is one specific reform for which we could fight in the international arena. Proceeds from such a tax could be used for long-term investments in education and health care in poor countries. DSA would benefit from activism of this kind, not only because we would be helping to put the brakes on the motors of global austerity, but also because we would build relationships with key socialist and labor allies from around the world that would help to both solidify the international socialist movement and provide a space for mutual learning and strategic dialogue.

6. Building DSA and the Socialist Left

DSA's role in building progressive social movements is essential to our work, and regardless of what we gain as an organization from this work it is an end in itself. Additionally, through our coalition work with other progressive organizations we learn invaluable organizing skills and discover countless ways to improve the work that we do. However, in order to be effective in this work, as well as build powerful independent socialist organizations, we need both to increase our own ranks and bring as many people and perspectives into the socialist community as we can.

There are a number of immediate tactics socialists can employ to further these goals.

The first is to emphasize our critical analysis of capitalism and positive vision of socialism in our coalition work. By introducing an anti-capitalist analysis into this work, we make clear the relationship between disparate issues and thus make progressive movements stronger and more effective. Because socialist politics are by nature multi-issue, DSA members are involved in many of the most important social movements in their regions, and the organization as a whole is in a unique position to foster connections between social movement organizers and create space for activists in different struggles to come together. By putting forward a positive vision of a future society, we raise organizers' and activists' long-term ambitions, which also gives them the inspiration to be long-distance runners in the movements, while also arming them against the Right's incessant red-baiting.

Second, we can actively build up the core within the broader progressive movement that self-identifies as socialist and consciously seeks to unify political theory and activist practice. To this end, recruiting new members to DSA needs to be a major priority. We should openly engage in this work as socialists, and our main methods of organizational growth should be political education and leadership development, as well as direct recruitment through tabling and petitioning. Our political education and leadership development work should involve everything from organizing reading groups, educational forums, speaking tours, “socialist schools,” and conferences to developing more systematic socialist educational materials for new members. Finally, following Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, we believe the struggle for socialism requires that we participate in the building of new cultural projects that project a socialist message to all social groups. We believe that democratic socialists working in the 21st century must open up socialist bookstores, bars, coffee shops, galleries, and community spaces. Socialists must participate in ideological debates inside and outside the university, and found and write for socialist daily newspapers, monthly magazines, and theoretical journals. Socialists must be active in every neighborhood in order to hear people’s concerns, to poster and spread our message, and to bring scores of new people and new ideas into the movement. These efforts will make us more effective in the work we do and will create a positive cycle in which having more activists produces greater effectiveness. Having more activists attracts new members. Additionally, these projects will help us to grow the independent socialist institutions we need to give birth to a new social order that truly embodies the principles of freedom, equality and democracy for all humanity.