

TEMPEST

Socialism from below and the rank-and-file strategy

A 2025 Tempest education series talk

by **Tim Goulet**

*In this talk, originally given as part of Tempest's 2025 education series, **Tim Goulet** articulates the importance of the rank-and-file strategy, delving into the relationship between the tradition of socialism from below and the necessity of supporting rank-and-file struggle, against both the bosses and the conservative labor bureaucracy, in the workplace.*

*Tempest will continue to publish talks from this year's education series, including primers on Marxism, Anti-racism and abolition, internationalism and anti-campism, the rank-and-file strategy, feminism and LGBTQ liberation, and others. These talks are intended to serve as an introduction to Tempest's **[core political agreements](https://tempestmag.org/about/our-politics/)** (<https://tempestmag.org/about/our-politics/>).*

I'm going to talk briefly about socialism from below. Then, I'll talk about the centrality of the workplace; working class struggle, consciousness and organization; the contradictory character of unions under capitalism; the labor bureaucracy; and the rank-and-file strategy, transitional politics, and organization. I'll also contrast what I refer to as the common DSA version of the rank and file strategy and Tempest's version of the rank and file strategy.

For a positive historical example of the rank and file strategy we'll look to the Communist Party from 1934 to late 1936. And for a negative historical example of the rank-and-file strategy, we'll look to Teamsters for Democratic Union's negative evolution. I'll close with some thoughts on general tasks for socialists in the labor movement.

Socialism from below is about building workers' power

I also wanted to preface this talk by restating what we mean by socialism from below, because that's the lens through which we view the labor movement. Socialism from below is rooted in the fundamental Marxist idea that **the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.**

(<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1864/rules.htm>)

And why is that? Because, in fact, socialism is a system of radical democracy, led by its associated producers, the working class must become fit to rule. This can only be manifested through a democratic struggle for self-emancipation. The labor movement has the capacity to be a school for such self-emancipation, and the unions therefore have an important role to play in the struggle for socialism.

Socialism from below is about building workers' power. It means workers leading their own struggles, building their own organizations, and fighting for the most consistent democracy possible.

As we often say, nobody's coming to save us. Socialism from below is the only viable road to forging a socialist society that isn't based on a minority ruling over a majority. The workplace isn't the only site of working class struggle by any means. But it does occupy a strategically central position in the fight for self-emancipation.

The centrality of the workplace rests on two interconnected realities. One, the social power workers possess and exert in the process of production. Two, the way that workplaces bring different sets of workers together, both increasing the possibilities and risks of collective action. In other words, the workplace is the location where workers' power is both most concentrated and, contradictorily, most vulnerable. Capitalism

is a system built on exploitation—the extraction of surplus value from the labor of workers. Without the continuous functioning of production in all its aspects— in factories, offices, warehouses, hospitals, schools, transport, even digital platforms—the flow of profit is choked off.

This dependency on workers' ability to labor is both capital's greatest weakness and the source of workers' greatest potential power. All strikes reveal this. When workers stop working, parts of the capitalist system stop moving. Owners may wield enormous resources, political influence, or state control, but they can't produce profit without labor's cooperation.

Moreover, unlike in other areas where oppressed groups may be dispersed geographically or economically and culturally segregated, the diversity of the working class is gathered daily into common spaces and compelled to cooperate or at least coordinate in the process of production and services.

As Kim Moody points out, the workplace is the most racially diverse space in U.S. society. Workers who share the same exploiter, labor on the same tasks or machinery, and share common grievances have opportunities to discuss and assess experiences and build mutual trust and unity.

However, common action is not automatic. Capitalism brings workers together in the labor process, but it also pulls us apart through labor market competition as we're forced to compete for limited jobs, housing, healthcare, education, and benefits. In the workplace, workers are also divided between full and part-time workers, job classifications, and departments with different pay grades.

Meanwhile, **[racial, ethnic, and gender differences are used to sort workers in both the larger labor market and at work](https://brooklynrail.org/2020/10/field-notes/Beyond-Racial-Capitalism-Toward-A-Unified-Theory-of-Capitalism-and-Racial-Oppression/)** (<https://brooklynrail.org/2020/10/field-notes/Beyond-Racial-Capitalism-Toward-A-Unified-Theory-of-Capitalism-and-Racial-Oppression/>). Bosses often use the fear of demotion, discipline, or job loss to keep workers isolated and passive. However, when workers engage in collective action against bosses, it can potentially overcome their isolation from one another and their sense of powerlessness.

When workers stop working, parts of the capitalist system stop moving. Owners may wield enormous resources, political influence, or state control, but they can't produce profit without labor's cooperation.

Successful struggle, taking a risk together and building ties with other groups of workers, creates a common experience and can promote a shared understanding that an injury to one is an injury to all. Once these bonds are built in struggle, they need to be preserved through democratic organization and continued battles with the employer.

The workplace's strategic centrality does not mean that working-class struggles are limited to battles over wages and hours. Nor are working-class struggles limited to the workplace alone. The working class doesn't cease to exist outside the walls of the workplace. Struggles over housing;

against war and police brutality; for healthcare, education, environmental justice, and reproductive rights; and against the far right, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and transphobia are also class-struggle issues.

Movement struggles also have the potential to spill over into the workplace. In the 1930s, the struggles of the unemployed created the conditions for the industrial strike wave that established the CIO. And again, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Black liberation struggle and the anti-war movement inspired young workers to challenge speed-up at work, often in defiance of their union leaders.

Now it isn't true that workers are always rearing to fight and are simply being held back by corrupt or conservative union officials. Nor is it true that most white workers and white blue collar workers are hopelessly racist and permanently incapable of solidarity. The reality is far less simplistic than the stereotypes would suggest, yet it's not cut and dried either.

It's important for socialists to have a realistic understanding of how working class consciousness develops. The objective position of workers under capitalism creates the conditions for workplace struggle, especially over control of the workplace. The objective position of workers also means that struggle is necessarily episodic.

Workers depend on their wages to survive. This means that workers cannot be on strike or engage in disruption continuously. Workplace struggles often take the form of strike waves and upsurges of struggle that are followed by longer periods of quiescence.

Different layers of workers develop different levels of understanding at different times based on their experiences of struggle, awareness of tradition, and their social milieu. The resulting unevenness of consciousness separates workers into three main layers: One, a majority of passive union members who hope their officials and politicians can do things for them. Two, a militant minority of labor activists and radicals who attempt to continue struggle when mass movements wane. And three, a labor bureaucracy or officialdom with its own distinct social interests that often diverge with those of rank-and-file workers.

While radical ideas might be able to move small numbers of workers into struggle, only struggle can move many workers toward radical ideas. This is especially true if socialists help lead these struggles and help workers draw out the lessons of experience. The cyclical nature of class struggle, alternating short periods of upsurge followed by longer periods of relative passivity provides the material basis for reformism among both the masses of workers and the union leadership. In the period between upsurge and mass struggles, most workers will retreat into private life—the hard work of showing up for work, playing by the rules, and taking care of their families. Workers

embrace a conditional reformism, the hope that they can make gains through official channels, without confrontation with either employers or the state. That's why most workers will look to their union officials or politicians to defend or improve their lives.

This reformism is conditional because there are times when official channels break down and workers are forced into direct struggle with their employers. These struggles will often pit them against labor officials as well. The officials' reformism is **unconditional** (<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/2508-the-paradox-of-social-democracy-the-american-case-part-one?srsltid=AfmBOorFKNkgslynJMFFuFz7TH4ZyQ8xXvbpE2eizaSSqf8UiCik0Sg8>): In order to preserve their role as mediators between labor and capital, and preserve the union as an institution which provides them with a life very different from the workers they represent, the officials can only go beyond the boundaries of the grievance procedure, routine bargaining, and elections when the ranks compel them.

Unions themselves embody these contradictions. We don't orient to unions because we think they're perfect. Far from it. They're often rife with racism and sexism. Business unionism is the dominant ideology, making union officials more concerned with partnering with employers than fighting them. Therefore, union leaders consciously attempt to contain class conflict rather than stoke it.

However, unions as the most basic form of working-class organization remain central to the politics of socialism from below. Marx argued that unions allow for a degree of protection against workplace despotism, reduce competition among workers, and provide permanent organization, a potential school for workers to learn self-organization.

There's a clear correlation between the progressive weakening of unions and the growth of reactionary ideas among working people. Without collective working-class organizations capable of and willing to resist the bosses in the state, workers relate to one another as competing sellers of labor power. They punch down, attempting to defend themselves at the expense of other workers. In the absence of collectivism, many workers make sense of their condition by adopting racist, xenophobic, elitist, and homophobic ideas, scapegoating other workers for their worsening social conditions.

Strong and militant unions are key to fighting this tendency. Nurturing a degree of class consciousness, union organization and struggle is a necessary precondition for political self-organization of the working class.

Clearly union organization and strikes will not by themselves create independent political organization. However, without the experience of collective organization at the workplace, workers cannot generalize their struggles into political organization, an action that can take up the demands of the

class as a whole. As Kim Moody [writes](https://jacobin.com/2018/08/unions-socialists-rank-and-file-strategy-kim-moody) (<https://jacobin.com/2018/08/unions-socialists-rank-and-file-strategy-kim-moody>), union organization is where class formation and class conflict begin.

Workplace struggles are a key precondition for both independent labor politics today and mass revolutionary socialist organization in the future. Revolutionary socialists view the labor bureaucracy as one of the obstacles to militant union struggle. The layer of full-time officers and staff who direct the unions from above often are often a crucial obstacle to workers. Union officials occupy a contradictory position. As both leaders of workers' organizations, whose members they must defend, and as mediators between labor and capital, their social position and their greater autonomy, higher salaries, and social and political connections with higher-ups leads them to embrace an organizational conservatism.

The workplace's strategic centrality does not mean that working-class struggles are limited . . . to the workplace alone. . . . Struggles over housing; against war and police brutality; for healthcare, education, environmental justice, and reproductive rights; and against the far right, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and transphobia are also class-struggle issues.

They want to maintain their good bargaining relationship with the employers and politicians, and they fear militancy, which could disrupt that. Put another way, the union bureaucrat's survival requires stable labor management relations. The union bureaucracy strives most of the time for a permanent state of consensus with the bosses, which makes the grievance procedure and routine collective bargaining the alpha and omega of trade unionism in their eyes.

Coercion and indignity suffered in the workplace will periodically lead workers into collective confrontation with employers in periods of heightened militancy. This can even bring workers up against the very limits of capitalist-labor relationships by challenging management for control of the workplace.

The same is not true for the labor official because of their distance from the workplace. The union bureaucrat's security, power, and prestige are bound up with the preservation of the labor union, not the labor movement.

This opposing social dynamic is most evident during heightened confrontations, such as strikes, when the basic necessities of life for rank and file workers hinge on the outcome. Union leaders will typically be more concerned with the stability and security of the union apparatus than they will be with rank-and-file expectations.

Not because of their personal preference for conservative politics or strategy, but rather because of union officials' social and material position within the capitalist system, they also look to the state to substitute itself for the unions, looking to state officials to deliver stuff for their members without having to mobilize the ranks for a fight.

Therefore, labor officials campaign for supposedly labor-friendly Democrats and lobby for stronger labor laws and social welfare as a substitute for independent rank and file power. At best, the labor bureaucracy focuses on negotiating for more and more equitable redistribution of income as wages and benefits rather than fighting for control over work. Ideally, the labor officials would like to receive these things without having to wage a fight, which could threaten the stability of the bargaining relationship with the boss or possibly create a challenge from the rank and file to their leadership.

On occasion, union leaders will engage in strikes. But their actions are limited by employer pressure. When rank-and-file militancy compels them to act, they will act on the worker's behalf by controlling negotiations and strike strategy from above. However, when workers move into struggle against their employers, they often find themselves hemmed in by their union leaders and find they have to do battle with both union officials and their bosses as a condition for victory.

The material basis for the rank-and-file strategy

All of this is the material basis for the rank-and-file strategy, which is embodied in the following two quotes.

First, The motto of the [Clyde Workers Committee](https://www.marxists.org/archive/gallacher/1915/clyde-committee.htm) (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/gallacher/1915/clyde-committee.htm>), which was an organization of hundreds of shop stewards in the in the Glasgow shipyards during World War I:

We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately when they misrepresent them.

Second, a century later,, a Mingo County, West Virginia teacher told their official leaders during the Red State Teachers Revolt in 2018:

Listen, you can all either, either get behind us or get outta the way, because if you don't, we'll run you over.

At its core, the rank-and-file strategy contends that the primary power of the labor movement lies not with union officials or staffers, nor with labor friendly politicians or labor law reform, but with the ordinary workers in the workplace.

The rank-and-file strategy views the working class, not as a passive group to be led, but as the active agents of self-liberation. The rank-and-file strategy involves a dual struggle against the bosses in the main, but also against those forces that often hold back worker self-activity within workers' organizations, namely the labor bureaucracy.

The rank-and-file strategy promotes struggle in three ways:

First, it's a way of restoring the link between socialists and the labor movement.

Second, it builds militant minorities of socialists and worker militants in the workplace who can build rank-and-file organization that can take the struggle directly to capital, operate independently of the labor officialdom, and even break the law if needed without, in the words of [Hal Draper](https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1970/tus/index.htm) (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1970/tus/index.htm>), “recoiling from the consequences.”

Third, it helps generalize struggles, in particular workplaces and industries into a political movement that can build an independent workers' party and a revolutionary socialist organization that can unify all the struggles of the oppressed and exploited.

For inspiration, most radicals in the labor movement look to the example of the International Socialists, who developed the rank-and-file strategy and attempted to put it into practice. During the strike wave of the 1960s and 1970s, Kim Moody would reintroduce and popularize the strategy to a new generation with his 2000 pamphlet, [The Rank-and-File Strategy](https://solidarity-us.org/rankandfilestrategy/) (<https://solidarity-us.org/rankandfilestrategy/>), which was published by Solidarity.

But the rank-and-file strategy has older roots, which we can trace back to the first four congresses of the Communist International and the united front strategy. This strategy was the product of the real rank-and-file revolts occurring throughout the capitalist world in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, including the revolutionary shop steward movement in Germany. In British shop steward organizations and the Italian and French workers' committees, revolutionaries debated how best to aid these struggles to promote independent rank-and-file militancy independent of the labor officials.

The rank-and-file strategy was a political strategy, not simply a technical approach to organizing and the labor movement. It was instead tied to the Communist Party's struggle to win the allegiance of workers from the reformist parties at the time.

While radical ideas might be able to move small numbers of workers into struggle, only struggle can move many workers toward radical ideas. This is especially true if socialists help lead these struggles and help workers draw out the lessons of experience.

Now, of course, we're seeking to implement the rank-and-file strategy in a very different period.

In the 1920s, there were mass communist and socialist parties in the wake of the first successful workers' revolution in Russia. Today, however, even bureaucratic unions have been gutted, reformist political parties have abandoned the struggle for reform, and revolutionaries in most of the world are in the minority and isolated from the working class.

Today, we start from a much weaker position. The challenge we face is to think through how to reconnect the socialist left to labor, build rank-and-file organization in the workplace, and promote struggle and political independence. In effect, the rank-and-file strategy today must seek to democratize the existing unions so that they can become models of militancy and solidarity. It must include building new unions in unorganized workplaces, primarily through shop floor organization and struggle and not simply through reliance on the NLRB machinery.

Because workers' ideas change through the experience of struggle, the rank and file strategy focuses on transitional politics and transitional organization. Both of these attempt to provide a bridge between workers' organization and immediate demands and broader class consciousness and revolutionary struggle. Historically, socialists have been central to building rank-and-file organization, using unions as bridges to class-wide organization. The militant minority of activists in these organizations are the audience for revolutionary socialist politics.

In periods of relative quiescence, workers can be won to socialism in the ones and twos, but in periods of growing struggle, substantial minorities of workers can be won to socialist organization. The concept of transitional politics stems from a simple observation: Workers under capitalism are

constantly compelled to fight for their immediate needs—higher wages; safer, more dignified working conditions; workplace democracy; and shorter hours.

These demands can seem modest, but by linking workers' day-to-day struggles to an organizational trajectory that exposes the limits of what capitalism is able to concede, workers can be compelled to expand their horizons and develop an understanding of how the capitalist system is fundamentally at odds with their basic class interests.

For example, a struggle against workplace speedup may begin as a narrow fight over health and safety, but because speedup is tied to the employer's relentless drive for profit, sustaining such a fight requires mass solidarity, confrontations with management, and sometimes breaking through bureaucrats' caution and timidity. In such moments of struggle, workers can discover their own collective power and start to see that winning lasting control over their living and working conditions points toward a society run on altogether different principles.

It's the power of mass disruptive working-class struggles that will be required to make fundamental changes to the system and build the power of our side. The role of the rank-and-file strategy and socialists in the labor movement is to help build that power.

In other words, it's not about jumping directly from today's grievances to socialism. Rather, it's about building a political bridge. Transitional organizations—shop floor committees, rank-and-file caucuses, cross-union reform movements, and militant shop steward networks—often emerge organically from the rank-and-file struggles in the workplace. What makes these organizations transitional is that they occupy a space between the established union bureaucracy and the kinds of future revolutionary organizations that are needed to challenge capitalism. They create the openings for workers to test their collective power, hold vacillating leaders accountable, and generalize the lessons learned across workplaces and industries.

A great example of a transitional organization in the U.S. was the **Trade Union Educational League**

(<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc206/tue-rank-and-file-strategy/>)

(TUEL) in the 1920s. This was a cross-union and rank-and-file network that was operating across a myriad of industries and orienting workers to a class-struggle perspective. It was initially supported by the Communist Party as a broad organization. TUEL was rooted in workers' real struggles and organized around the two central demands among workers at that time: amalgamating existing craft unions into mass industrial unions and building a labor party.

The TUEL raised consciousness through collective action and education, and it provided a stepping stone for socialist politics. The TUEL ultimately failed because of CP control of the organization. This prevented an independent leadership from developing among the rank and file, while party factionalism spilled over into the TUEL, creating sectarian rifts.

The task of transitional politics and organization must involve socialists engaging deeply in workers' everyday struggles and helping build independent rank-and-file organizations that give workers the means to fight and learn democratically and collectively, using these experiences as a bridge or a series of bridges to a wider struggle for working class self emancipation.

The rank and file strategy is consistent with our politics, which are from below. For us, reinvigorating existing unions and building new unions is in conflict with top-down approaches to union reform and staffer-led organizing, which tends to produce more conservative strategies, policies, politics, and outcomes.

In the past decade, the rank-and-file strategy gained wide popularity as it was promoted by various forces in DSA, particularly the Bread and Roses caucus. But this version of the rank-and-file strategy bears little resemblance to its historical, political, and practical meaning. A hollowed-out version of the rank-and-file strategy drained of its socialist content and recast as a depoliticized organizing method was peddled as something more compatible with DSA's reformist politics. DSA's version didn't grapple with the central issues that give the strategy meaning, sidestepping the problems of the labor bureaucracy and business unionism.

Absent the rank-and-file strategy's ultimate socialist goals and the Marxist theory informing it, what was left was less a political intervention and more another recipe for rebuilding a more politically progressive version of business unionism—what Joe Burns has described as “[labor liberalism \(https://jacobin.com/2023/10/class-struggle-unionism-spirit-labor-movement-strike-exploitation\)](https://jacobin.com/2023/10/class-struggle-unionism-spirit-labor-movement-strike-exploitation).” Rather than grounding the rank-and-file strategy in the logic of class struggle, many tended to frame it in terms of Jane McAlevey's [organizing model \(https://spectrejournal.com/reversing-the-model/\)](https://spectrejournal.com/reversing-the-model/), which elevates

the role of the professional staff organizer over the organization of the militant minority. Echoing the AFL-CIO officialdom, this perspective blames external forces—first and foremost anti-union legislation—for the decline of the labor movement. McAlevey's answer is a combination of legal reform and staffer-led organizing. This found fertile soil in the DSA, which has a heavy concentration of union staffers, who tend to think in terms consonant with their social and material positions, among its labor activists.

Even more myopically, some commentators have simply urged socialists to take union jobs, as if that were an adequate enough prescription to activate the labor movement, address the organization of the unorganized, or build socialism. Today, this limited approach would exclude nine out of ten workers. The only guidance DSA gave its members in unionized workplaces was to promote the election of reform candidates to office with little or no discussion of building organization and struggle in the workplace.

While revolutionaries and radicals support running reform candidates for union office, we believe this should be subordinate to what raises the consciousness and militancy of rank-and-file workers at any given time. The reformist version of the rank-and-file strategy reduces union office to just another tool in the organizer's toolbox. It's all about capturing control over union resources and infrastructure with no emphasis placed on where power can truly be built, which is in the workplace.

As a strategy for socialist staffers, the DSA version of the rank-and-file strategy is compatible with the old social-democratic logic of placing a firewall between union organizing and politics. In this case, it ensures that in practice DSA labor activists work primarily to elect progressive or “socialist” Democrats. Some DSA writers like Eric Blanc have gone so far as to argue that these electoral campaigns created workplace struggle, claiming that Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign was the impetus for the 2018 Red State Teachers revolt. Not surprisingly much of DSA’s labor work since 2020 is focused on democratic party elections.

If one truly believes that Sanders was responsible for the strike wave and not the conditions faced by workers or their own organizing initiative, it’s no great leap to believe that socialists should orient ourselves toward elections instead of building workers’ power. This logic also leads many in DSA to refuse to criticize electeds like AOC, who voted to break the rail strike.

To add insult to injury, a resolution for open bargaining—something even McAlevey championed—was voted down at the recent DSA convention. It was also difficult to detect a genuine rank-and-file strategy in DSA’s approach to the Teamsters’ contract campaign at UPS. DSA followed Teamsters for a Democratic Union ([TDU \(https://tempestmag.org/2025/11/the-conservative-devolution-of-teamsters-for-a-democratic-union/\)](https://tempestmag.org/2025/11/the-conservative-devolution-of-teamsters-for-a-democratic-union/)), which supported the conservative O’Brien administration.

As Dan La Botz explains, it became impossible for DSA to develop an independent and critical attitude toward the Teamster leadership as O'Brien absorbed TDU and TDU absorbed the DSA Teamster group. Here we can see the tendency of the top-down approach to lead to more conservative outcomes.

The differences between the real rank-and-file strategy and the hollowed-out reformist version of it can be illustrated by two examples: the positive example of the Communist Party in the mid 1930s and the negative example of TDU and their relationship to the O'Brien-Zuckerman administration in my union, the IBT.

The CP and the labor movement, 1934-1936

I'll begin with the positive example. In practice the CP's work in the labor movement between 1934 and late 1936 embodies the best elements of a rank and file strategy.

The CP played a leading role in the upsurge that created industrial unionism. The CP entered the depression with between 10,000 and 15,000 members. It was rooted in the working class in key industries: auto, steel, transport, maritime, electrical appliances, and textiles. Despite years of

factionalism fueled by leadership struggle in the Soviet Union, the CP pursued the rank-and-file strategy primarily through the TUEL in the 1920s

In the late 1920s, the Communist International shifted to its Third Period politics that saw revolution as imminent and social democracy—not capital or the growing fascist threat—as the biggest enemy of the working class. This ultra-leftism led to the destruction of the German workers movement by fascism, as well as the CP's and SPD's refusal to unite in the street against the Nazis.

The CP pulled its members out of the existing AFL unions and launched their own “revolutionary unions,” isolating them from militants in the existing unions. During the setback, the CP did successfully organize among the unemployed and Black workers. Hitler's regime stabilized itself and smashed the social democratic communist unions and parties.

The Communist International faced the reality that Hitler's victory was not a brief interlude to a successful socialist revolution. By early 1934, the CPs around the world abandoned the ultra-leftism of the third period returning to the united front strategy. In the U.S., the CP abandoned its small revolutionary unions and moved into the federal locals, which the AFL used to try and capture growing workplace unrest among industrial workers.

CP cadre brought with them over a decade of trade union organizing experience. This experience included the politics and practices they had utilized during the early days of the TUEL, but now these were linked to a massive rank-and-file rebellion. This repositioning allowed the CP to be strategically placed in the early CIO organizing drives in basic industry.

CP militants like Harry Bridges led successful struggles on the West Coast that solidified powerful longshore unions and electrical manufacturing. CPers helped build the base for what became the United Electrical Workers, which is still a bastion of left-wing unionism today. Perhaps the most successful communist efforts were in the auto industry. Communist militants such as Robert Travis and Windham Mortimer played key roles in resisting AFL leadership's reliance on government intervention and instead fought for the most democratic rank-and-file movement possible, which would eventually lead to the formation of the progressive caucus.

The key to the CP's success in these years was rank-and-file-led, workplace-centric organizing, such as the formation of democratically elected strike committees, which were essentially workers' parliaments, and rank and file caucuses. These caucuses mobilized workers and bypassed the conservative union officialdom, who relied on federal mediation and closed-door negotiations instead of their members' organizing power.

CPs utilized mass picketing, sit-down strikes, shift walkouts, and wildcat strikes that empowered union members.

Communists were at the core of an alternative leadership to complacent AFL leaders. Their decision to abandon ultra-left abstention and orient to the AFL locals laid the groundwork for the success of the CIO.

The CP's orientation began to shift in 1935-1936, when the Communist International prioritized building alliances with democratic capitalists and reformist officials over promoting independent worker struggles. In the U.S., the CP subordinated independent working-class initiative to alliances with the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and the CIO bureaucracy. This meant not only compromising politically but also led to the CP being essentially de-classed, insofar as it went from being predominantly rooted in the industrial working class to a party rooted in middle class elements in the professions.

The self-subordination of TDU

On the other hand, the long devolution of TDU from a militant rank-and-file reform group in the IBT to uncritical supporters of the O'Brien-Zuckerman leadership provides a cautionary negative example.

TDU is one of the most important rank-and-file reform groups in the history of the U.S. labor movement and one of the most powerful rank-and-file groups founded by revolutionary socialists. It is still looked to by many as an important part of the labor left. But TDU's devolution from a radical rank-and-file reform organization to junior partner in the Teamsters bureaucracy needs to be faced honestly.

TDU was founded with 200 members from 44 locals across 15 states at Kent State University. It emerged out of a merger between Teamsters for a Decent Contract and Teamsters United Rank and File. Both groups were formed and grew during the wave of wildcat strikes and renewed labor militancy in the early 1970s.

In 1976, they carried out their first big campaign—organizing the ranks to win a new national master freight agreement. TDU at the time was committed to democratic rank-and-file control of the union and confrontation with employers, sell-out union leaders, and the gangster elements that led the IBT. They also actively opposed racism and sexual discrimination in the industry and in the union. In the late 1970s, TDU was growing through organizing fights and through workplace organizing and member education. TDU supported strikes, led efforts at democratization, and developed core rank-and-file strength in key industrial jurisdictions, such as steel hauling and car hauling.

By November, 1979, TDU had upwards of 5,000 members and had 35 active chapters. When it merged with the Professional Driver's Council—a safety advocacy group for truck drivers with ties to Ralph Nader—it doubled these numbers to around 10,000. At least twenty chapters were publishing local newspapers and TDU had its own national newspaper, Convoy Dispatch.

TDU won substantial early victories for the union in the 1970s and 1980s, spearheading fights to vote down concessionary contracts in freight. And at UPS in the 1980s, TDU continued to grow by exposing the corruption among the IBT officialdom who had ties to organized crime and were deeply embedded in class-collaborationist structures.

In 1989, the Department of Justice was preparing to place the IBT under trusteeship or government control when TDU successfully pressured them to give members the right to directly elect officers and convention delegates. TDU also won another big victory for the union in 1989, when it led a fight for simple majority rule on contract ratifications for the membership, overturning the old guard policy requiring a two-thirds majority to reject a contract.

In 1991, TDU mobilized rank and file militants to elect Ron Carey, a former UPS driver and leader of New York's reform local 804, as IBT president. In 1997, with TDU initiating a grassroots contract campaign, the IBT struck UPS and won the first major strike in over two decades. This was considered the

high-water mark of TDU's strength in the union.

Carrie was witch hunted out of office in the wake of the UPS victory on charges of fundraising irregularities, of which he was later acquitted. But Carey's purge allowed a conservative backlash in the IBT, which included repression of reformers. That continues today. TDU's radical potential was also undermined by the decline of membership militancy during the 1980s.

As the industry was deregulated, many in and around TDU—including our comrade [Sam Friedman](https://archive.org/details/teamsterrankfile0000frie/page/n5/mode/2up) (<https://archive.org/details/teamsterrankfile0000frie/page/n5/mode/2up>)—argued that the danger of TDU moving in a more bureaucratic and conservative direction was a distinct possibility if the primary focus was shifted toward union elections as opposed to workplace organizing.

TDU's course shifted visibly in 2011, when it backed Sandy Pope for IBT president. Pope was a genuine reformer with close ties to TDU and the first woman to run for the Teamsters highest office. That same year, Fred Gegare, a long-time Hoffa loyalist, did an abrupt volte-face and ran as an independent candidate. His shift was treated with understandable derision by TDU.

Over the next two five-year election cycles, TDU's choices became more and more questionable as it began to move away from an independent oppositional stance in the union. By 2016, Hoffa's bureaucratic coalition was unraveling as Hoffa became more unpopular with the ranks due to unnecessary contract concessions and personal fallings out with various loyalists among the officialdom who were seeking their own career tracks.

In Teamster politics, Fred Zuckerman, another ex-Hoffa loyalist, with no prior connection to the reform movement, ran for president that year with TDU support and nearly won. In 2021, TDU endorsed Sean O'Brien for union president. Not only had O'Brien been a Hoffa supporter, he was a [reactionary hothead](https://tempestmag.org/2024/09/the-rnc-does-the-teamsters/) with a history of intimidating and threatening reformers on Hoffa's behalf, including TDU members.

While TDU refused to support Gegare in 2011, there was little apprehension with regard to O'Brien who became a reformer nearly overnight. As Joe Allen [writes](https://authors.tertulial.com/allenojoe-draftv4iskv/books/teamsterland-reports-on-america-s-most-iconic-union-reports-allen-o-joe/B0FLDHKX48), TDU's experience running union election campaigns and their prestige in the IBT provided O'Brien with another route to power after being fired as the chief UPS negotiator. TDU provided the only credentials.

But O'Brien also had to claim the mantle of reformer. TDU portrayed the endorsement of O'Brien as a strategic alliance and downplayed his past conservatism and bigotry, adopting a pragmatic tone focused on winning and getting results. But the fact is, even if O'Brien had been the militant reformer many of his supporters strangely claimed him to be, militant leadership would have only been able to build the power to actually transform the union by organizing a rank-and-file movement prior to taking office. This is precisely the approach that TDU had abandoned years before.

O'Brien won the election lopsidedly, albeit with record levels of voter abstention. Since then, TDU has been completely uncritical as O'Brien has cozied up to Trump and defended some of the worst of his anti-labor actions. TDU appears to have abandoned independence for an inside track to power, effectively integrating themselves into the union bureaucracy.

The fruits of TDU's self-subordination to O'Brien came in 2022-2023, when broad layers of teamster militants, labor activists, and other unions believed that the IBT was preparing for a major confrontation with UPS, the largest unionized employer in the U.S., that would reverse decades of concessions. Instead of a repeat of the 1997 strike, O'Brien canceled strike preparations and, and agreed to a contract that the [Wall Street Journal said \(https://www.wsj.com/opinion/ups-teamsters-deal-avert-strike-sean-obrien-3bb8e61e?mod=hp_opin_pos_6#cxrecs_s\)](https://www.wsj.com/opinion/ups-teamsters-deal-avert-strike-sean-obrien-3bb8e61e?mod=hp_opin_pos_6#cxrecs_s) was a victory for the company.

And that did little to reverse give backs. TDU defended the new contract and actually suppressed dissidents in its own ranks who called for a vote no campaign. But the TDU's conservative devolution was not predetermined: the turn to an overemphasis on rote union elections and transforming the union from above aided and abetted a process of bureaucratization in TDU itself. For example, there have only been two non-elected organizing directors of TDU, including Ken Paff, from 1978 until 2023. While TDU couldn't will class struggle into existence, its shift in focus away from the workplace, ingrained into the organization a completely counterposed set of ideas and practices more in line with traditional bureaucratic unionism.

It has been a very long time since TDU campaigned for a national strike, for example. More recently, TDU went so far as to remove its rank-and-file bill of rights from its program while campaigning from O'Brien, and at least four members of TDU's International Steering Committee are now paid employees of O'Brien's administration. The O'Brien administration and TDU have also moved to silence critics. O'Brien hired a union-breaking law firm to [shut down](https://danlabotz.medium.com/obrien-the-teamsters-tdu-and-the-labor-left-a-controversy-1f9bc32684e3) [TeamsterLink](https://danlabotz.medium.com/obrien-the-teamsters-tdu-and-the-labor-left-a-controversy-1f9bc32684e3), a website run by reformers. In addition, [TDU has barred](https://joeallen-60224.medium.com/whos-afraid-of-teamsters-mobilize-)

[bd535f76bbcc](#)) members of Teamsters Mobilize—a small network of teamster activists—from attending their conventions and expelled longstanding member and outspoken critic of O’Brien, John Palmer, barring him from attending their convention.

Tom Leham, Tim Sylvester and Bill Zimmerman, the three long-time reformers who created TeamsterLink with a total of 120 years of experience in the IBT, wrote, “TDU, once considered the watchdog, is now the propaganda wing of the O’Brien IBT.” The good news: there has been ongoing opposition to this repression from a number of long-time Teamster militants and even TDU members. A few weeks ago, an [open letter \(https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/09/05/open-letter-to-tdu-members/\)](https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/09/05/open-letter-to-tdu-members/) was circulated online, calling on TDU to break with O’Brien, which was signed by a number of notable Teamster and TDU activists.

Building from below

For revolutionary socialists, TDU’s degeneration is a cautionary tale. Without organizational and political independence, a clear class analysis, a revolutionary perspective centered on the rank and file, and a core of activists, even radical movements can become instruments of the status quo. The

rank-and-file strategy must be tied to a political vision of class struggle and socialist transformation, or it runs the very real risk of becoming a tool of institutional repair, not a method of liberation.

Right now, we need movements and organizations that meet the urgency of the moment. The state of the labor movement in this country is not great. In 2024, only 9.9% of workers were union members, and these numbers have dropped again since Trump laid off over 200,000 public sector workers and stripped nearly half a million more of collective bargaining rights. Only 6% of the private sector is organized.

And these were the stats prior to Trump firing the commissioner of the BLS. Most workers today are not in a union. That means that any rank-and-file strategy has to orient in large part to unorganized workers.

Yet despite low union density, union support remains high. According to recent polling, around 70% of Americans support labor unions. Younger workers in particular have been fueling recent organizing campaigns. We've seen some high profile strikes in the last couple years—the UAW standup strike against the big three automakers and the SAG-AFTRA strike among writers and actors being the most visible—even though the frequency of strikes is also at a historic low.

The UPS contract campaign, while not living up to the hype of O'Brien's strike-ready posture, did help bring unions and labor struggles into national view during the Biden administration. Also, NLR win rates for representation elections, limited as they were, rose above 70%.

The deep roots of the current crisis go back to the consolidation of business unionism in the postwar period, including its alliance with the Democratic Party, the purge of the Left from the CIO, and the absorption of the remaining Left into the labor officialdom or the Democratic Party. These shifts short circuited the organizing of the South and the intensively gendered clerical workforce. It blocked the complete integration of workers of color into the labor movement, and it led to hostility or indifference to the major social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. The result was a weakened militant minority, completely isolated from the radical Left, unable to knit together the rank-and-file rebellions of the long 1960s and 1970s, which left the labor movement incapable of responding to the employer's offensive and neoliberalism, which have hollowed out even the most bureaucratic unions.

Many left-wing commentators call for reforms— passing the PRO Act, putting more labor-sympathetic personnel in the NLRB, banning captive audience meetings, boosting NLRB funding, and investing in more organizing rather than simple lobbying. All these legal options could have beneficial effects

by removing roadblocks to labor's advances, but it would still require an activated rank-and-file movement to capitalize on the removal of these impediments.

But the fact is that none of these reforms are likely to happen in the absence of rank-and-file rebellion. For socialists, the key task is to intervene within labor and build a militant democratic current of workers that are capable of transforming their unions into instruments of struggle and linking them to a wider fight for socialism.

Some necessary steps would include building rank-and-file movements in organizations that unite workers across divisions, democratize their unions, wage struggles that bureaucracy avoids, and that willingly clash with union bureaucracy when it gets in the way. It's only through the self-activity of rank-and-file action that workers can develop their confidence and break down the passivity that comes with relying on union officials and staff.

Whether through the formation of rank-and-file led reform caucuses, strike committees, or networks of shop stewards, the goal is to alter the primary relationship in union affairs—the power imbalance between workers and owners and between the rank and file and the union bureaucracy. On the

basis of a revival of rank-and-file organization, we can build TUEL-like transitional organizations that link together militants across industries and unions and that promote class politics. We can also build united fronts or alliances between unions and organizations of oppressed people.

These coalitions need to go beyond coordinated publicity and lobbying efforts between bureaucratic unions and NGOs. Instead, they must be democratically run and oriented toward building unity across race, gender, and legal status within struggles.

We must also develop a labor internationalism that can build links of solidarity with worker struggles abroad as an alternative to xenophobic nationalism and shortsighted protectionism.

Unions in the U.S. are mostly tied to the Democratic Party, which has historically subordinated labor to the priorities of capitalist profitability. Socialists must educate, organize, and fight for political independence, developing working class alternatives that break with both capitalist parties. This could mean the eventual movement within labor to form labor parties in independent electoral campaigns or movements that highlight class demands outside the framework of bourgeois politics.

The rank-and-file strategy is not simply a technical organizing strategy. It's an orientation to the working class with the ultimate goal of building the socialist movement. Without revolutionary politics, even the most radical union struggles could be co-opted or channeled back into being an institutional tool for capitalism.

Importantly, though, in the short term, the key to reviving rank-and-file activity has to take stock of what workers believe is presently possible. This means raising expectations is crucial. Socialists in the workplace can play an important role, but ultimately it's through the struggle itself, particularly through victories, even small at first, that expectations and consciousness can be radically elevated. This means organizing around the issues that affect workers the most in their respective workplaces, and that can move the most workers into motion at any given time. It might be an abusive supervisor, wage theft, or an issue concerning health and safety. Unfortunately, in most scenarios, it will not be big picture political questions which typically preoccupy the minds of socialists that will engage our coworkers.

To be clear, this is no way meant to be a recipe for economism or soft-pedaling socialist politics or important political stances. Clearly, we educate and organize on these issues, but with the understanding that our audience in the labor movement for these issues is the militant minority who can only grow in both a quantitative and a qualitative way through concrete struggle and victory.

Reformists believe we need to change the law before class struggle can happen on a serious level. We would argue that this has it exactly backward. Rather, it's the power of mass disruptive working-class struggles that will be required to make fundamental changes to the system and build the power of our side. The role of the rank-and-file strategy and socialists in the labor movement is to help build that power.

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