

TOWARDS POWER

Draft Program *of the* Collective Power Network

OUR CHALLENGES

Over the past three years, our organization has taken important steps to build the power of workers in the United States. In this time our membership has grown into the tens of thousands and the number of chapters has grown into the hundreds. From Tampa to Tacoma, from Sacramento to Somerville, chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America have multiplied in major urban areas, smaller cities and towns, and rural communities.

As exciting and dramatic as the growth of our organization has been, we are also confronted with an even sharper sense of the challenges we face.

Many workers in the United States today have only ever known an economy gripped by the “Long Depression.” Since the 2007 financial collapse, our world and our lives have been marked by low wages and little security. Most workers today have spent their entire working lives within the arc of the neoliberal political and economic project, under which the network of social service systems—forced upon the ruling class by organized and militant workers in the years before and after the Second World War—has been systematically dismantled.

Capitalism’s systemwide failures have been externalized onto the planet itself. The recent UN report on climate change forecasts serious environmental instability if dramatic action is not taken. Regardless of the potential and political will in support of such action, we are already locked into a pattern of destabilizing harm. Already we are seeing the effects of climate change contributing to destructive storms, rising seas, and prolonged droughts. It is an extension of the logics of capitalism that the people and regions which are bearing the brunt of this growing crisis are those which are already the most vulnerable: children, the elderly, working class communities, Black and brown communities, the Southern United States, and the Global South.

This economic and environmental crisis has been exacerbated by the historic political crisis facing US workers. Over the last sixty years, the organizations that workers forged through struggle as vehicles for their demands—including unions, community organizations, grassroots civil rights organizations, and semi-mass parties—were systematically eviscerated through deliberate campaigns of legislative and judicial obstruction, public intimidation, and often violence.

While the inertia of neoliberal economics presses workers deeper into poverty and insecurity, it simultaneously requires the disempowerment, demobilization, and disenfranchisement of workers as a political class. Today, workers have virtually no authentically democratic organizations in which to advocate for themselves. Overwhelmingly, the landscape is dominated by non-membership advocacy groups, NGOs, socialist micro-sects with no real influence, and populist political candidates. *None of these models have a credible vision for how society can move beyond capitalism; even when they offer up partial solutions, they fall short of the mass democratic model that is prerequisite to transformative, systemic change.*

The collapse of the neoliberal model and subsequent crisis has created a deeply felt expectation for serious political change among huge swaths of society. Unfortunately, because no credible socialist alternative has been built, much of this energy has been captured by the far right, specifically in the US with the election of Donald Trump. The right utilizes the political effects of neoliberalism in support of an agenda that divides the working class by race, by gender, and by nation-state; further weakening the potential for collective action to improve our lives while lining their own pockets. By contrast, the socialist project not only seeks to improve the economic conditions of workers, it does so in pursuit of working class political power and in the name of working class agency.

Our organization is uniquely positioned to face these problems and to provide the means for developing viable political alternatives. But doing so means building a mass organization capable of weighing challenges, developing strategic goals, and acting on them with national cohesion, all while maintaining our structure as a member-run, big-tent, democratic organization. How we constitute such an organization is the core question we are facing today—all other questions hinge on our response.

OUR ORGANIZATIONAL CRITIQUE

To confront these challenges, our organization must pursue a more focused discussion about how to overcome them. However, no clear path forward for our organization has been presented and there are no real platforms or mechanisms in place to have productive, ongoing organization-wide discussion and exchange of ideas. Furthermore, there is deep dissatisfaction among members and leaders with how our organization operates on the national level. Compounded by the lack of tools for substantive discussion beyond the chapter level, this has led to a sapping of energy and understandable skepticism as to whether a truly national organization is possible or even desirable.

The problems we face as a national organization are structural in form and political in content. While DSA experienced an incredible boom in membership over the last three years, the actual form of organization that sustained DSA before the bump—a loose and informal network of activists with no real center—has remained largely intact. As a result, we have national bodies that in theory represent the whole of the membership or a constituency around an issue, while in practice they are effectively tied to nothing. Whether they be national committees, working groups, the national office or the NPC, these bodies lack clear connections both to the membership at large and to one another, thereby limiting accountability and the capacity to formulate and sustain a cohesive organization-wide orientation. Such entities may be voted in at a Convention every few years, but in their day to day work they are unmoored from realities on the ground and often only impacted by the comrades and constituencies that they happen to come in contact with or choose to seek out.

Because we have a decentralized, *ad hoc* national structure without a clear center accountable to the members, caucuses have emerged as the main engine for impacting national priorities, as well as primary conduits for the distribution of information about the national and across chapters. As a result, caucus politics in DSA have increasingly become a zero-sum game. Caucuses—both formal and informal—compete with one another in protecting and expanding the work they have a personal stake in and their visions for the organization become increasingly oppositional. It should be obvious that there will be disagreement in a political organization and that caucuses and tendencies will be a healthy byproduct of that process of debate. But without a strong and democratic national infrastructure, these disagreements do not function as robust political debates so much as internal fights; as clashes between personalities rather than good faith attempts to organize towards a positive vision for our organization. This *ad hoc* and adversarial model is neither sustainable in the long term nor one capable of building power.

OUR VISION

We believe the 2019 Convention gives our organization a critical opportunity to take a step back and assess how to create a DSA that has the strength necessary to meet the challenges of our political moment; one which provides the model that will allow us to build our collective capacity to achieve a just political future.

We need to have a much more concrete discussion about the organization we are collectively building and our goals in building it. We're beginning that discussion in these pages, and we invite you to join in.

We acknowledge there is a great deal of debate on the subject of our organizing model. Rather than a mass model, some advocate a model that resembles a loose network of locals, with only a bare minimum of national structure, viewing this as the most democratic form of organization. Not only do we disagree that such a model is democratic, as it only tends to amplify the loudest voices, we also believe such a network model can do very little to confront the organizational problems most pressing to us—the need to give all members a voice in our work, the need to grow beyond a predominantly male and white membership to a membership that better reflects the working class of this country, and the need to develop an organization able to both build and effectively wield power.

The broad goal of building a mass organization of workers fighting for a democratic socialist society is seriously undermined by our current membership composition and lack of diversity. Despite this being a well-known problem in our organization, virtually no specific solutions have been presented to address it. Anti-racist and socialist-feminist organizing are too often centered on calls for creating welcoming spaces, rather than developing strategies to address the substantive and specific challenges people of color and women face in the workplace and society at large. The energy generated through discussion of racial and gender composition has mostly been funneled into the same tired factional conflicts and have produced very little in the way of a clear strategy forward.

We believe that this problem requires a holistic solution. Simply put: we do not believe that an organization whose only unifying idea is a sort of generalized anti-capitalism can be an attractive vehicle for workers in any mass sense. Without a shared language around our goals and program, clear strategies and methods, or a coherent plan to win victories, it will be difficult for our organization to rise very far beyond the level of subculture. There will always be more attractive organizations whose goals are clearer and ideas more accessible, even if they lack a meaningful analysis or a strong political vision. If we don't take action now, the opportunity for building a real socialist left in the US could easily be lost.

We believe our organization should move towards a model that can incorporate and channel democratic input from all levels of the organization, from the neighborhood to the NPC. A model that can translate broad internal debate into effective collective action. A model that can empower membership to hold our elected leaders, as well as political candidates, accountable to our collective will. A model that can facilitate the planting of deep roots into communities and workplaces in a real, living sense. A model that not only enables us to win meaningful political victories, but one that can shoulder the weight of our historic tasks without buckling like so many organizations and movements before us.

For these reasons, we believe our organization ultimately must develop a mass party model for the 21st Century. Such a model should allow for strategic flexibility and sensitivity to regional conditions while enabling our organization to gather a great deal of input from across the organization and then turn that input into action. It should seek to enfranchise the many thousands of members who have joined our organization but have no real determination over our work. It should give us the tools to build real organizational unity, which can only be achieved through a patient process of earned trust through common work and collective democracy.

Developing a suitably ambitious and democratic mass party model for our times will not happen overnight, nor is there any existing model we can take as a readymade template to import and implement wholesale. Instead, we should carefully study the successes and failures of a wide range of historical and contemporary experiences worldwide, with careful attention to those which have taken a fusion approach to organizational strategy, operating on multiple fronts including electoral, cultural, and within unions and social movements.

Moving toward such a model would involve structural and political reforms that intentionally grow the capacity of our organization and the working class generally to act on their interests. We believe this involves strengthening both the democratic power of the membership and of the national organization. This does not mean creating an organization that is simply top down. As democratic socialists we believe in strengthening democracy where it exists and extending democracy where it does not yet reach; we would be poorly served by building an organization that did not reflect those commitments.

There appears to be near universal agreement in our organization that a great deal of experimentation needs to be done in our organizing and models and that this is critical work which only local chapters with deep knowledge of their regions are truly equipped to carry out. However, the clear need for an organization where locals have a wide range of motion is not the same as an organization where *nothing* is agreed upon, no systems of mutual accountability or support are in place, and where the organization is thereby *devoid* of effective means of collective decision making. That is largely the sort of national structure currently in place. We can and we must formulate alternatives to this largely ineffective model.

OUR GOALS

It is exactly because we want to have a clear debate about our goals and the means to achieve them that we have formed this group. We aim to develop a common platform incorporating the perspectives and aspirations of members and chapters that share our belief in the need for a

democratic and effective national organization capable of building real power for workers. Our immediate goal is to work together to produce documents and proposals for the 2019 DSA National Convention in line with these perspectives and to have a positive impact on those discussions through specific proposals.

As organizers and socialists, we have grown through the experiences of experimenting with, and constantly revising our approaches to projects and campaigns in our locals. We believe that organizing is a creative process and that good praxis requires ongoing experimentation and learning. Many of us have been life-long organizers and activists and bring those experiences to our work in DSA. Our goal through this network is to build a dynamic group where both experienced and new organizers can commit to and further develop their politics while working together to transform our organization into the mass working class organization we need.

We are not a caucus in the sense that we have a specific set of external politics or campaigns we seek to set above others, nor do we feel the need to have a *line* on every question that will come before the Convention. This is not to say that we are *non-ideological* or to pretend that we have no politics. We believe the political goal of democratic socialists should be to build real power for and with the billions of workers and oppressed people the world over. Mass organizing models are absolutely necessary to achieve that. But those politics are secondary to our main goal, which is to present positive proposals for how the organization can become more democratic and effective on a national level. We believe this is a crucial challenge that only the delegates gathered in Convention can meaningfully address.

Since we are a network of chapter leaders and rank-and-file members and not a national caucus, we aim to collaborate with all other organized groups at the convention who share our goals on the basis of substantive political agreement; this collaboration will not be at the exclusion of any other caucus. While we want very much to have a large presence at the convention, our main goal will be maintaining a clear voice for our shared ideas. We do not, however, believe that this work ends with the 2019 Convention, or is limited to the adoption of our proposals, or the election of a new NPC. We are committed to building a stronger DSA, a more coherent and effective national organization, and a broad working class base as members and leaders of an organization to which we are deeply committed.

In the coming months, we intend to produce a series of concrete proposals for the 2019 Convention. The details and the nature of those proposals will be an evolving conversation which we encourage you to join. However, some of our goals will include the following.

Democratic regional organizations and a National Organizing Council.

There is a fundamental breakdown in the functioning of our national organization as it relates to the day to day work of members in chapters. Right now there are few to no mechanisms for national to learn from and engage chapters outside of the discussion forum and staff. National bodies should be both accountable and effective, which at DSA's current size requires creating intermediate democratic structures. National decisions should be based on concrete dialogue from the local up and between locals, and decisions should have clear channels of communication traveling back down to the chapters.

- Develop clear models for how democratic Regional Organizations (not necessarily based strictly on state) can be formed and sustained with the goal of having most chapters in regional organizations by 2021.
- Support these through consistent in-person state and regional gatherings so that relationships can develop beyond discussion forums and social media exchanges.
- Establish a National Organizing Council composed of elected representatives from these regional organizations to act as an intermediate democratic body to support substantive cooperation both among chapters and between chapters and national as well as an additional layer of support for chapters, organizing committees, and at-large members.
- Reform how national bodies such as committees, working groups, and commissions are organized, and integrate them into both chapter level organizing and the National Organizing Council.

Towards 100,000 members by 2021.

Our main goal should be to develop DSA into a mass organization composed principally of workers, able to build power through elections, movements, and workplaces. Despite our tremendous growth over the last three years, our organization remains mostly a marginal force, especially when compared to organizations like the old Socialist and Communist Parties in their heydays. We also face the historic task of building a truly diverse organization that is not predominantly white and male. This means that growth alone is not the only goal, but that this growth must be deliberate and intentional.

- Establish a national commission to develop a clear plan to get DSA to 100,000 members by January 1st, 2021, including regional and local planning to get us there with special attention to intentional growth outside of members' personal networks.
- Establish a leadership development program that supports training and provides financial support for low-income members, people of color, women and gender non-conforming comrades who otherwise could not afford to attend.
- Realign the national office around the goal of growing our organization in new areas and among new populations, rather than focusing on managing chapters, by shifting those responsibilities to the regional organizations.

Align the national office around clear goals and expand our staffing capacity.

Staff play a critical role in our organization and will continue to do so, especially if we achieve growth-sustaining structural reforms. However, staff alone cannot be taken as a viable substitute for urgently needed democratic infrastructure that can mediate between the national and local levels. We need to align the national office's priorities with where we are as an organization today, and not where we were three years ago. We need to acknowledge that much of our growth to date is amongst members who are relatively new to organizing and to building organizations and provide more consistent and thorough support for building strong chapters and developing effective leaders.

- Hire more organizing field staff and focus their efforts around establishing stable new chapters where clusters of unorganized members exist, especially in rural areas and the South, as part of an overall strategy to get our organization to 100,000 members by 2021.
- Focus National Office chapter support on developing regional organizations along with creating stronger tools for new and growing chapters to make informed decisions about organizational structures, financial controls, developing campaigns and projects, and security practices.
- The National should work with locals to hire their own local or regional organizers when they have the capacity and to develop the financial oversight and fundraising skills that will allow them to sustain regional staff.

Develop a clear multifaceted strategy for labor.

Unlike many areas of DSA's work, labor is not a single-issue campaign but an ongoing master component of our political project. Ultimately our aim should be to build the sort of organization with the credibility and strength to call hundreds of thousands of workers on strike when necessary. The path to building such an organization will require a clear strategy, with flexibility based on regional conditions, along with a serious commitment from our members and their national bodies. While we recognize there are often contradictions between unions and their membership, these contradictions should not be simplified but rather engaged with based on local conditions.

Working within unions to activate and organize rank-and-file union members remains a critical component of our labor work. However, it is only one front in a complex and multifaceted struggle. Across the US, right-to-work laws and decades of deindustrialization have gutted traditional labor strongholds, as millions of workers have flooded into growing sectors such as service and logistics. Meanwhile, historic and current racial and gender disparities across sectors have left many workers without representation. Our aim must not only be to defend and strengthen the already-existing labor movement but to capture new territory by leading efforts to organize workers in key unorganized sectors.

- For the restructuring of the Democratic Socialist Labor Commission (DSLCL) to become a body whose membership is composed of chapter level labor branches and committees.
- For the hiring of dedicated labor organizers to assist the DSLCL in their critical work nationally, as well as to directly support locals seeking to establish labor branches.
- For national and the DSLCL to focus on supporting the creation of labor formations at the chapter level to serve as schools of organizer training, networks to connect labor organizers and worker-members, and centers of support for workplace organizing to members and non-members alike.
- For the rapid development of materials and trainings to assist locals in carrying out labor work with a particular emphasis on identifying key industries and workplaces in their areas, recruiting membership from those industries, forging relationships with key unions in their area, and building capacity for workplace organizing.

Building an international left against empire.

The interplay between race and politics in the United States does not exist in a vacuum and cannot be addressed solely on a national scale. Internationalism is critical to building a US left that can dismantle imperialism and end capitalism as a global system. As the largest socialist organization in the largest imperial power on earth, we are and must be an active agent in this process. In 2017 DSA left the Socialist International, but as of yet no proposals have been offered nor progress made to maintain or create formal ties with the international left despite significant shifts in the global situation, many of which are driven by US policies. It is urgent that DSA takes its obligation to international unity seriously and that members have a clear framework through which to pursue our internationalist agenda.

- Develop a strategy to build ties with left and labor organizations across the world, with particular focus on Mexico, Puerto Rico, Canada, Brazil, the Caribbean and Latin America broadly.
- Establish an International Commission with clear directives to build relations with left parties, tendencies, governments, organizations, labor unions, and movements outside of the United States.
- Offer solidarity in the form of amplification and material support to socialist movements, and left identity movements, as well as individuals targeted for their leadership of such movements by hostile institutions and social forces.
- In recognizing that the US working class is itself multinational, internationalism at home means developing concrete steps to support and integrate the struggles of immigrant and migrant workers in the US—these include struggles for political rights as well as economic struggles embedded within the broader labor movement.

OUR INVITATION

These are bold ideas that will require sustained work and serious collaboration that we haven't yet had to realize as an organization. We believe that as socialists our goal should be to develop and unite around a program based on an accurate analysis of the current situation, a commitment to building a strong and diverse base of working class member-organizers, and the creation of robust structures that put the tremendous energy, capacity, and collective hope of our membership to the best use; so that we may rise to our historical tasks and not allow our goals to be dictated merely by the possibilities we see in front of us at a given moment.

If you agree with our vision, we invite you to join the Collective Power Network. We want to bring a strong clear voice to the 2019 Convention for the type of organization we feel we need. An organization that can realize our collective power; one that respects and integrates differing viewpoints, and that looks outward, not inward, to build a truly mass organization reaching out with our own hands towards power.

[Find out how you can get involved!](#)

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