



# Class Struggle on the Shop Floor

*A Strategy for a New Generation  
of Socialists in the United States*

WORKERS  
COMMITTEE

FRSO

Freedom Road  
Socialist Organization



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March against right-to-work in Wisconsin.

Socialism is back. After declaring nearly three decades ago that “there is no alternative” to capitalism, the ruling class in the United States has worked itself into a frenzy denouncing socialism at every turn –totally baffled by its growing popularity among young people.

They’re not making it up. A 51% majority of people ages 18-29 in the U.S. had a favorable view of socialism according to a 2018 Gallup poll. When asked about capitalism, just 45% of young people had a favorable view – a staggering 12-point drop from the same poll question posed eight years ago.

While the ruling class and their media mouthpieces puzzle over socialism’s roaring comeback in U.S. politics, the cause is plain to see. It’s not “those lazy millennials and their social media,” or overprotective parents, or public school curriculum. It’s capitalism.

In that poll’s eight-year timespan, Wall Street saw its profits skyrocket to new heights. Banks and corporations received deep tax cuts

and inflated their stock prices through share buy-back schemes. Eager to forget the 2008 financial crisis, politicians and media pundits proclaimed an 'economic recovery' across the USA.

But the working class experienced no recovery at all. Hundreds of thousands of working families lost their homes through foreclosure. Millions of young people graduated college with crippling student debt, only to enter a terrible job market offering low-wages, part-time hours and few if any benefits. Black and Latino workers saw the little wealth they had evaporate, and wages for the entire working class remain stagnant, even as their bills grow more expensive. Is it any wonder why young workers think capitalism sucks and want an alternative?

Sooner or later, capitalism's loss of legitimacy was bound to take on political dimensions. In 2016, tens of thousands of young workers got involved with Senator Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Drawn to a platform of social democratic reforms like Medicare For All, free college and a \$15/hour minimum wage, countless workers and young people acted on their anti-capitalist instincts for the first time and got involved in politics.

Sanders lost, but interest in socialism and activism only grew as thousands flocked to left-wing groups, particularly the Democratic Socialists of America, to learn more and get involved. Out of the Great Recession, a whole new generation of socialists has emerged with the conviction that capitalism is the problem and something has to change.

But capitalism is an enormous system and overthrowing it will require more than debates on Twitter. Where should socialists and radicals in the U.S. put their energy towards fighting capitalism and building socialism?

This paper lays out the labor strategy of the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO), which guides our organizing work in trade unions. It argues that socialists belong in the labor movement, organizing with the working class on the shop floor to fight our class enemy. Only the working class has a material interest in the complete overthrow of all the exploitation and oppression, and unions represent the most organized section of the working class. To that end, serious socialist revolutionaries in the United States need to root themselves among the rank-and-file and join with union militants in rebuilding a fighting labor movement.

## The Working Class & Socialism

While socialism has grown in popularity, many people have different ideas of what it actually means. Bernie Sanders calls himself a ‘democratic socialist’ and embraces the social welfare states of Denmark, Sweden and Norway. In the same vein, others suggest that socialism is any government program, ranging from Social Security to the police. The right-wing calls just about anything ‘socialist’ if they don’t like it, even the 2008 government bailout of Wall Street. Whatever their differences, all of these views have one thing in common: their ‘socialism’ easily coexists with capitalism – and all of its contradictions.

But capitalism is more than just a market economy. It’s an entire mode of production characterized by particular economic and social relations between two classes: a small ruling class of property owners and a large working class. Having neither wealth nor capital, the worker survives by selling their labor power to the capitalist. Profit and the immense social power of the capitalist comes from this exploitation of wage labor. If this exploitation of the majority by the minority were to end, so too would capitalism.

These two classes have conflicting interests that inevitably express themselves through struggle. While the capitalists have their immense wealth and the state on their side, workers have their labor and superior numbers. In its drive for greater profit, capitalism forges together an ever-growing majority class of workers drawn from every nationality, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age and walk of life. They can organize together, withhold their labor and fight back against their class enemies.

To end their misery once and for all though, the working class will have to overthrow their rulers and take political and economic power for themselves. When we talk about socialism, we don’t mean a ‘Green New Deal’ or ‘Medicare for All’ legislation. Reforms like these would certainly help the working class under capitalism, but they won’t put an end to the capitalist system’s exploitation, oppression, war and misery. We want to end the rule by billionaires, corporations, banks, and their politicians. In its place, we want socialism – rule by the working class over the economy, government and society. To get there will take nothing short of a revolution.

The working class is the natural home for socialists. This isn’t out of some moral obligation to help the poor, or because workers are perfect people. Plenty of contradictions exist within the working class, especially in the United States. But only our class has an objective in-

terest in the end of capitalism and the victory of socialism. If you want those things too, the working class is where you need to organize.

## Why unions?

It's fitting that as socialism returns to the mainstream, so does trade unionism. Since the 2008 economic crisis, a greater number of Americans support unions and would join one if given the opportunity. But while public opinion shifted to labor's side, right-wing politicians launched an all-out legal and political attack on unions, particularly in the public sector. It looked like 2018 would deal a body blow to organized labor in the form of the Supreme Court's decision in *Janus v. AFSCME*.

But something bigger happened to labor in 2018: Starting in West Virginia, teachers across the country came down with a bad case of strike fever. They took to the picket lines, often in flagrant violation of state laws, and raised bold demands over wages, health care, and funding for public education – and in most cases, they won. Worker militancy is contagious, and hotel workers in many cities followed the example by striking. UPS Teamsters voted for strike authorization and voted down their contract for the first time in history, and steelworkers forced employers to accept their demands by presenting a credible strike threat. Rank-and-file union militancy has breathed new life into a labor movement on life support. Now is the time for socialists to dive in, join the class struggle, and bring these two movements back together.



*West Virginia teachers on strike, 2018.*

Unions are the most important mass organizations of workers. Situated at the point of production, unions bring workers together to address their day-to-day issues and immediate concerns on the shop floor. They

provide a vehicle for workers to struggle with their bosses over wages, benefits, working conditions and more.

Pitting labor against capital, these struggles over economic demands are actually larger struggles over power and control of production. They draw sharp lines of demarcation between workers and capitalists, allowing those workers engaged in the fight to see their individual interests as part of a larger, collective class. Struggle is the most powerful teacher, and fighting unions operate as schools for workers to become conscious of their class interests – “schools for socialism,” as Marx once said.

But we won't have a revolution without a fighting labor movement, and most unions today are not oriented towards class struggle. Unions will need to get back to basics: taking on employers, mobilizing the rank-and-file, organizing the unorganized and making use of the strike weapon. That transformation won't happen by itself. It will take a militant minority of union fighters coming together to organize their coworkers, struggle with their bosses, and kick out any sellout union officials who get in their way.

## **Problems of Socialism & Unions in the United States**

The U.S. labor movement developed differently than its counterparts in Europe. For one, there was a shortage of labor in the North American colonies, which large plantation owners supplemented by kidnapping and enslaving Africans. Even as capitalism took off in the north, the wide availability of land in North America acted as a 'safety valve' preventing too much worker rebellion. When cities became too crowded by poor wage workers and their families, the state could entice some with the possibility of land out west and upward mobility. Early U.S. courts outlawed strikes and criminalized collective bargaining as 'conspiracy'.

But the main obstacle for the U.S. labor movement was slavery. Slave labor drove down wages for workers and made it harder to collectively bargain. Slave-owners and capitalists alike used white supremacy to promote a fraudulent unity between rich whites and the white workers they exploited on the basis of color. So long as slavery existed, workers in the U.S. would not develop a consistent class consciousness.

The civil war started as a conflict between northern capitalists and southern plantation owners, but it unleashed a social revolution that abolished chattel slavery and transformed the country. Emboldened by the promise of emancipation, slaves called general strikes across the south and shut down the plantation economy. The earliest labor unions

and socialists in the U.S. supported abolition and fought valiantly for the Union Army against the Confederacy. After the war, Black freedmen built powerful political and labor organizations to democratize the south, protect African American civil rights, and put more economic power in the hands of workers and poor farmers. But the old planter class reasserted itself through Jim Crow, lynchings and the Ku Klux Klan, desperate to keep Black labor in bondage and divide it from white labor. It's a contradiction the working class still reckons with today.

### ***Socialists in the labor movement***

There was a time in U.S. history when a socialist movement outside of the labor movement was unimaginable. Socialism was not the ideology of middle class students and intellectuals. It was a major political trend in the labor movement, drawing the best shop floor leaders into its ranks and bringing workers into pitched battles with employers and the state. From the great railroad strikes of the 1890s led by Eugene Debs to the massive picket lines of the Industrial Workers of the World at the turn of the century, socialists stood tall as the most consistent fighters for the working class.

The Great Depression brought American trade unionism into a new era of struggle. Facing crippling poverty and unemployment, workers fought back and made widespread use of their greatest weapon: the production-halting strike. When the conservative leaders of the American Federation of Labor refused to seize the moment and lead the rebellion, union militants formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), organized industrywide strikes, and won countless gains for the working class.

At the core of the CIO's incredible success sat communists, socialists and radicals. The Communist Party of the 1920s and 30s drew thousands of union militants into their ranks, who in turn mobilized millions of workers, employed and unemployed, for battle against the capitalist class. Even labor leaders who rejected socialism recognized their crucial role and built strong alliances with them in the CIO. Because their ideology allowed them understand capitalism and class struggle beyond individual fights, communists became the most resolute and dependable soldiers in the labor movement.

### ***The Hard Divorce & Labor's Retreat***

As workers returned home from the battlefields of World War II, employers quickly moved to quash the power of organized labor at home. Politicians from both parties passed the Taft-Hartley Act, which

outlawed key labor tactics like solidarity strikes, and purged communists, socialists and radicals out of the labor movement with the Smith Act. Shamefully, conservative and opportunistic labor leaders fell in line and forced out some of their best, most militant fighters.

Despite these attacks, unions would reach the height of their numerical power in the post-war decade. 35% of workers (17 million) belonged to a union in 1954, the most in U.S. history. Labor's strength reflected its continued militancy and use of the strike weapon. In 1952, 470 major strikes involving 2.7 million workers rocked the United States, costing employers 49 million work days.

But without the presence of socialists and radicals pushing a class struggle approach to trade unionism, labor leaders became more accustomed to striking deals with employers than actually striking. In exchange for raises or pension contributions from employers, union bureaucrats accepted no-strike clauses in their contracts and promoted the bogus idea of shared interests between bosses and workers. As class collaboration took greater hold among labor's leadership, the number of strikes declined and concessions to employers increased. These sellout bureaucrats discouraged membership participation and quashed militancy among the rank-and-file, transforming unions into top-down service organizations run like a business. Predictably, union membership rates dropped.

Without a class struggle approach, union leaders fell for the oldest trick in the capitalist playbook and gave up the working class' biggest weapon: mobilizing masses of workers to withhold their labor. Employers, sensing the weakness of their class enemy, launched a brutal offensive against organized labor in the 1980s headed up by Ronald Reagan. Beginning with the air traffic controllers strike in 1983, employers took cues from the federal government as they busted strikes with permanent replacement scabs, closed union plants to relocate overseas, and force contract concessions on their workers.

This anti-union offensive continued in the decades after Reagan, from the passing of NAFTA in the 90s to the Tea Party attacks on public sector unions of the 2010s. Strikes hit an all-time low in 2009, which saw only five major work stoppages. Nine years later, union membership hit a record-low with just 10.5% of workers (14.7 million) belonging to a union. Labor's 30-year retreat gave corporate America free rein to exploit the working class with increased intensity and drive up their profits. From the 1970s to present, real wages



for workers remained stagnant while productivity increased 77%.

Everyone knows there's a crisis in organized labor, but most of today's union bureaucrats are as resistant to the solution as their predecessors. Hundreds of millions in campaign contributions to Democrats hasn't produced a single piece of pro-labor legislation, nor have community-based social justice efforts like the Fight for \$15 stopped the bleeding of membership.

Nothing good for either movement came out of socialism's separation from labor. Divorced from its natural base in the working class, the U.S. left became increasingly dominated by middle class radicals and intellectuals – and their ideas. For many, capitalism was here to stay and the best we can do is push for reforms through the Democratic Party. Others, seeing the painful decline of organized labor, looked outside the working class for solutions – non-profits, academia, radical small businesses, co-ops and more. Whatever form they took, both approaches shared the same pessimism about the working class and its power to transform society.

The 2008 financial crisis devastated the working class economically, and the government's response – bail out the banks, let the people suffer – made it perfectly clear which class rules in this so-called democracy. Raw outrage boiled over in 2011 when the Occupy Wall Street movement took to the streets against the 1% ruling class. But without a strong, fighting labor movement as its backbone, Occupy Wall Street couldn't formulate a consistent working class platform, and its anarchistic structure allowed the state to easily tear it apart.

After decades of decline and retreat for both movements, the future looks promising. But nothing happens without struggle. Workers in the U.S. need a strong, fighting labor movement to confront and eventually overthrow capitalism. To do that, unions will have to revive the strike and commit to class struggle, and socialists have an important role in making that happen.

## **The Task is Fusion**

History has given socialists in the United States the crucial task of fusion: reuniting Marxism with the workers movement. To this day, a separation persists between the working class and socialism. Workers have no political party of our own, and most of our unions are led by sellout bureaucrats invested in seeing capitalism continue at the expense of our class. If we want this to change, the working class in

the U.S. will have to take up socialism as its aim and Marxism as its analytical tool for getting there.

Fusion isn't a matter of debating more workers into socialism or handing out Marxist reading lists at the warehouse gates. Marxism is the science of making revolution, and its home is among the working class. The main reason we don't have millions of working class socialists in the U.S. today is the low level of class struggle, which means fewer workers are conscious of themselves as part of a class.

While more workers are developing class consciousness on picket lines than any time in the last 30 years, the majority of workers don't yet think of themselves this way. On some level, every worker understands that someone else gets rich from their hard work, and few are satisfied with their paycheck. But naming that 'someone' is a different story. Right-wing media and Republican politicians tell workers to blame immigrants, or poor people on food stamps, or secret societies – and some believe them. Others see the problem as a few bad apples in management.

A class conscious worker knows their enemy: the ruling capitalist class that exploits us and gets rich from our labor. They see themselves as part of a large, multinational working class with its own economic and political interests, which conflict with those of the ruling class.

Without class struggle, it's harder for workers to see themselves as part of a larger working class with its own distinct interests, let alone take up the fight for socialism. Class consciousness is not the same as becoming a socialist. But we won't have socialism without tens of millions of workers developing class consciousness.

### ***How does class consciousness develop?***

People's ideas about the world and their place within it come primarily from their social relations and their material conditions. But people's thinking isn't carved in stone by fate. The question organizers have is, how do people learn? We primarily learn through practice; from taking action; by doing something. Practice is the source of knowledge, as any good scientist conducting an experiment knows. You form a hypothesis, test it through an experiment, sum up the results and draw conclusions for next time.

This holds a lot of importance for socialist organizers. It means the working class will only develop class consciousness on mass scale through struggle. Fusing socialism with the working class only be-

comes possible with class consciousness, which itself comes about through class struggle.

Socialists have an important role in this process. In every battle, there are actually two fights taking place: against the enemy and over the summation. Whether a particular fight ends in victory, defeat or something in-between, all sides will try to sum up the key lessons from the experience. It's in our interests to make sure the people we want to organize sum up the fight correctly, building on successes and learning from setbacks.

In the labor movement, this process of 'struggle, summing up, and more struggle' is key to raising workers' class consciousness. To the boss or a sellout union bureaucrat, the takeaway from a defeated strike might be that workers shouldn't strike at all. Militant strike leaders would have a different take on the same event: assessing its strengths and weaknesses in order to make future strikes more successful. The question is, which summation do the masses of workers accept?

Scientific socialism, which is Marxism, arms workers with the tools to understand capitalism as a system and effectively fight it. It's the duty of socialists, armed with this tool of ideology, to bring it back to the labor movement as rank-and-file workers, unite with those forces who want to struggle, and help win the battle of summation.

## **Transforming Our Unions & the Militant Minority**

2018 marked an exciting explosion of union militancy in the U.S. as public school teachers across the country went out on strikes, breaking the law in many cases. The inspiring victories of teachers in West Virginia and Chicago's charter schools reignited conversations throughout the labor movement about union militancy and the importance of the strike weapon. Some of the more progressive union leaders have started talking about strikes too, like Sara Nelson of the Association of Flight Attendants, who proposed a general strike to end Trump's government shutdown. In total, 20 major work stoppages involving 485,000 workers happened in 2018 – the highest since 1986. Class struggle is re-emerging as a significant trend within organized labor.

But the victory of this trend is not certain. In the same year teachers risked it all on the picket line and won, the Teamsters' international officers overturned the historic majority no-vote on the UPS contract and ratified the concessionary agreement anyway. Union

membership levels hit their lowest point in a century, no doubt fueled in part by the Supreme Court's disgraceful decision in *Janus v. AFSCME*. Even as it bleeds out, the U.S. labor movement remains led by class collaborators who have zero interest in class struggle.

### ***Class struggle unionism vs. class collaboration & its forms***

Throughout its history, two trends have existed in the American labor movement: class struggle and class collaboration.

Class struggle unions anchor themselves in the workplace among the rank-and-file workers. They openly challenge the boss' power on the shop floor, fight employers for better wages and conditions, and embrace union militancy up to and including the use of strikes. They see the membership as the union's greatest strength and encourage democratic participation from the rank-and-file. They consider their particular fights as part of a larger struggle against a ruling class of employers and strive for united action with other unions. They 'organize the unorganized' and set their sights on broader political fights for the entire working class.

Unfortunately, a different trend of trade unionism predominates today: class collaboration. Instead of irreconcilable conflict between workers and bosses, class collaborators see a harmony of interests. Early American socialists called them the 'labor lieutenants of capital' for good reason. They work out common policy with employers and objectively serve as a check on working class militancy. In no uncertain terms, transforming the labor movement will require overthrowing these class traitors and discrediting the union philosophy they practice.

This destructive trend in the labor movement has predominantly expressed itself as business unionism, which centers union power around paid staffers, lawyers, professionals and lobbyists. Seeing no inherent class conflict between employers and workers, business union officials fear rank-and-file militancy and avoid empowering the members. Their cowardly unwillingness to battle employers has degraded the single-most important mass organizations of workers into little more than job insurance and benefit providers.

It's no surprise that business unionism failed to stop the decline of organized labor that began in the 1970s. Class collaborator bureaucrats gave away the farm through no-strike agreements, an over-reliance on labor law and arbitration, and deliberate demobilization of the rank and file. Losing ground but unwilling to break the law, these bureaucrats looked to lobbying and electing Democrats to save labor, even as that

party embraced free trade agreements and union-busting measures. Of course, the real solutions were the ones most offensive to business union bureaucrats: revive the strike, build shop floor militancy, and bring back class struggle.

In the last decade, another type of unionism has emerged in the U.S. labor movement: social justice unionism. This trend, pushed by middle class activists and embraced widely by business union leaders as a way out of labor's crisis, emphasized the need for unions to build alliances with social movements and community activists on broader political issues. The Fight for \$15 campaign at fast food restaurants came directly out of this approach and scored some notable victories. But while social justice unionism correctly recognizes the need for labor to build alliances, it puts the cart before the horse. After all, unions can't offer much meaningful solidarity if they're bleeding members and losing ground to employers. It makes the same error of business unionism by mistakenly locating labor's power outside of the workplace, away from the rank-and-file. Unions are not lobbying groups for progressive issues; they're fighting organizations of the working class.

### ***Tactics of the Militant Minority***

How then do we put the labor movement back on a class struggle basis? How do we transform our unions into fighting workers organizations capable of challenging the ruling class?

Socialists in the United States have grappled with this question before. In the 1920s, union militants and shop floor radicals joined the Communist Party. Government repression during World War I had left the IWW in shambles, and the vast majority of organized workers belonged to the more conservative, class collaborationist American Federation of Labor (AFL). Writing off the existing unions as hopeless would be a mistake since it would just leave the majority of organized workers, including those who wanted to fight the boss, under the misleadership of class collaborators. Instead, communists joined the AFL unions as rank-and-file workers with the goal of uniting with the 'militant minority' interested in struggle and transforming the labor movement. Their approach worked, evidenced in the labor upheavals of the 1930s and the formation of the CIO. Socialists today need to take a page from their playbook.

The militant minority are those union workers who know the score. They clearly see management as the enemy of workers and want to fight back. But they also understand that most of their union officials don't

share their view and collaborate with the boss. Whether organized or not, large or small, a militant minority exists in every union. They represent the natural trend towards class struggle in the working class, and that makes them key to transforming our unions.

Militant minorities exist at every level of the labor movement. In many local unions, they organize themselves as caucuses or networks. Some unions have large reform caucuses, like Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which provide union-wide organization for the militant minority. Within the AFL-CIO federation, some international unions have represented a tendency towards more militant action. On the world stage, class struggle unions have generally congregated in the World Federation of Trade Unions, though many agitate within the more collaborationist International Conference of Free Trade Union for a different approach.

But the militant minority is not just a grouping of workers. It's a tactic for transforming our unions.

Since today's union officials are workers' main obstacle to fighting back, the struggle against the boss simultaneously becomes a struggle against class collaboration. This important principle determines the militant minority's approach to transforming our unions. We target our attacks principally on the boss, rather than sellout bureaucrats, because it allows us to unite and mobilize the most workers for action. We approach the union officials, asking them to stand with the workers and join the fight against the boss. This puts collaborators between a rock and a hard place, forcing them to declare their class allegiance for both workers and bosses to see. If the officials join with us, good! Our struggle against the boss – and the class struggle in general – grows stronger. If the officials refuse, they are forced to step between the workers and the boss, exposing themselves as collaborators and opening themselves up to attack by the rank-and-file.

This tried-and-true tactic works at every level of the labor movement. As we win victories at lower levels, we can use the militant minority tactic at higher levels. The goal of the militant minority is to transform our unions into class struggle organizations. In concrete terms, this means overthrowing collaborating union officials and replacing them with class struggle forces.

It's no surprise that those unions engaged in the recent strike wave have active, well-organized militant minorities. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), for instance, has led several major strikes since 2012, including the first charter school teachers strike in U.S. history last year. Their union wasn't always at the forefront of class struggle. A militant minority of



*Chicago charter school teachers & staff rank-and-file militants.*

teachers, united under the Caucus of Rank & File Educators (CORE), organized their coworkers school-by-school to fight for greater funding for public education. CORE kicked out the do-nothing bureaucrats and sell-outs, took over the CTU and mobilized thousands of teachers, students and their parents against budget cuts and school closures.

## **The Shop Floor, Rank-and-File Strategy**

Socialism isn't going to develop as a major trend among the rank-and-file of the labor movement by itself. It will take conscious, collective effort and organizing to rebuild fighting unions and fuse Marxism with the workers movement.

Here's one effective way for this new generation of socialists, radicals and progressives to fight capitalism in the United States: Get rank-and-file union jobs. Find and unite with the militant minority. Learn the contract and the grievance procedure. Organize your coworkers to fight the boss. Push class struggle unionism as a shop floor militant.

The basic foundational class conflict under capitalism starts in the workplace, where capitalists exploit workers for their labor power to generate profit. This doesn't mean that socialists should only participate in their unions and nothing else. It means that trade unionism is an economic struggle containing the seeds of political struggle. A fighting labor movement will strengthen the entire working class movement on its many battlefields. But we won't ever overthrow capitalism without it.

### ***Concentrating our forces***

While any one socialist can get a union job and start organizing on the shop floor, that's not a recipe for success. We face enormous obstacles in the workplace: repression from the boss, repression from union bureaucrats, inertia and sometimes hostility from coworkers, to name a few. Rank-and-file organizing requires a lot of patience, hard work and

creativity, and it's better to tackle this challenge with others committed to the same project.

The FRSO promotes a policy of 'concentration' in our work. At the local level, this means that three or more comrades should get jobs within the same union; if possible, at the same workplace and on the same shift. In our experience, as more hands join the same project, the work becomes exponentially more successful.

At the national level, 'concentration' means making collective plans to determine where we dedicate our limited forces to make the greatest impact. Here again, Marxism plays a crucial role in analyzing capitalism and observing trends in the economy.

The U.S. economy today has shifted away from labor-intensive manufacturing that marked the core of early 20th century trade unionism. While the U.S. manufactures more today than ever before in its history, the number of manufacturing jobs has plummeted by almost a third since 2000, which significantly weakened the power of organized labor in this sector. As capitalism becomes even more monopolized and integrated, however, logistics and transportation take on greater importance as 'choke points' in the economy. This industry still remains partly unionized and represents a powerful, growing sector of the working class with potential for militant action.



*A parking lot organizing meeting of UPS Teamsters.*

UPS, for instance, is both the largest employer of union members in the U.S. private sector and the biggest trucking company in the world. On any given day, UPS handles about 4% of the U.S. gross domestic product and 2% of the world's gross domestic product in its logistics network. The Teamsters, which represents the nearly 250,000 workers at UPS,



have an active and well-organized militant minority that has mounted serious challenges to their class collaborationist leadership under Jim Hoffa Jr., even voting down the UPS contract in 2018. As the Amazon behemoth grows larger and develops its own logistics network, the Teamsters are uniquely positioned to mount a working class challenge to the power of monopoly capitalism.

### ***Reviving the Strike in the Public Sector***

Militant unionism has seen its strongest revival in the public sector, particularly public education. Emerging out of the 1960s and 70s, public sector unions had to fight just to win the right to collectively bargain, often striking illegally to force city and state governments into collective bargaining. Victories won by the civil rights movement, like affirmative action hiring practices, opened public sector jobs to African Americans, Latinos and other oppressed nationalities, and women. Through public sector unions, these oppressed workers often confronted both their employers and the racist, sexist and discriminatory policies they faced on and off-the-clock.

Reagan's anti-union employer offensive took a steep toll on private sector unions, which made their counterparts in the public sector increasingly vital to the labor movement. No longer the small fraction of union members they were in the 1960s, public sector unions make up a simple majority of the unionized workforce today. It's the most heavily organized sector of the working class in the U.S. today, with 33.9% of public sector workers belonging to a union in 2018.

Employers took note of this shift. It's no surprise that most attacks on labor in the last decade targeted public sector unions. Starting with far-right Wisconsin governor Scott Walker's Act 10, which stripped public employees of the right to collectively bargain, employers have waged a countrywide offensive to further break organized labor. This latest anti-union assault has taken a markedly racist and sexist character, owing to the diverse membership of public sector unions. It's proof-positive that the entire working class suffers when the democratic rights of African Americans and women are under attack.

But this right-wing offensive has not gone unanswered. Teachers in Illinois, West Virginia, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Arizona, California and many other states led a wave of strikes over funding for public education and the rights of teachers, often joined by support workers like bus drivers and cafeteria staff. Public sector strikes differ from

their private sector counterparts in that a work stoppage usually saves the employer money, rather than costing them profit. Since the 'costs' must be of a political nature – disruption of essential services and routine – these striking teachers unions have built large coalitions with students, their parents and their communities to win. Where a well-organized militant minority existed, they won their demands.

## **Uniting the Working Class**

By bringing together different workers on the basis of a shared class interest, unions provide the organizational vehicle for the working class to confront racism, sexism and other forms of oppression experienced under capitalism. As a class, workers share a core interest in ending their exploitation, poverty and misery. But while the capitalist system is an economic formation, it also has social and political manifestations. Racism, for instance, comes out of a system of national oppression central to capitalism at its highest stage, in which the ruling class seeks to dominate and exploit entire nations. Sexism too has its roots in the oppression of women in class society.

These forms of oppression are key pillars propping up the social, political and economic power of the capitalist class. They create real inequalities between sections of our class, making fertile ground for spreading destructive ruling class ideas among workers. But the working class' power lies in its capacity for unity, which means it has an objective interest in tearing down all forms of oppression under capitalism. People overcome backwards ideas through struggle, not moralizing or online debates, which makes class struggle unions a proven vehicle for overcoming chauvinistic ideas among the working class.

## ***Breaking the Chains of National Oppression with Union Power***

From the beginning, racism has presented the single biggest obstacle to working class unity. Capitalism in the United States was founded on the theft of Native people's lands and the labor of African slaves. These extreme forms of exploitation were the material basis for the rise of racist ideologies in the United States.

White supremacy is an ideology of class collaboration, which promotes a fraudulent unity between white workers and their exploiters on the basis of skin color. In practice, the entire working class suffers. The enslavement of Africans in the U.S. South degraded and weakened the early labor movement of the North. After emancipation, northern capitalists and southern elites used segregation, lynchings and racist discrimination to break off white workers from their natural class allies. It's no coincidence that avowed white supremacist politicians from the Jim Crow South, elected only by disenfranchising Black voters, imposed the first Right-to-Work-for-Less laws that weaken unions to this day.

It's not just a question of backwards attitudes or prejudice. Racist ideas and attitudes persist because of their material roots in real inequalities between nationalities. It's a question of national oppression. In the U.S., the ruling monopoly capitalists oppress and exploit African Americans as an entire nation, stripping them of their resources, labor, wealth, dignity and freedom. Chicanos – the people who historically lived in the southwestern states taken from Mexico in 1848 – and Hawaiians also face this national oppression, as do other national minorities and indigenous peoples. Even to this day, the U.S. maintains Puerto Rico and several other islands as colonies, robbing their wealth and denying them independence.<sup>1</sup>

For many decades after emancipation, many conservative labor leaders refused to organize Black workers and fought to maintain segregated unions. Class collaborators promote the ideology of the boss to disarm the workers movement so it's no surprise that these misleaders of labor also promoted white chauvinism among white workers. The capitalist class took full advantage of this division, bringing in Black workers as low-wage replacements to break strikes called by whites-only unions. Time and again, our history proves that a divided working class is a conquered working class.

But class struggle unionism takes a different approach, promoting solidarity over chauvinism. At the turn of the century, the Industrial Workers of the World organized integrated unions, bringing together Black and white workers, men and women into a single union capable of mounting an effective challenge to the boss' power. Throughout the 1920s, communists in the Trade Union Education League agitated for AFL unions to admit Black workers and women as members, which later became central to the formation of the CIO during the Great Depression. Braving the brutality of Jim Crow, communists organized some of the first unions in the Black Belt South – sharecroppers and industrial workers – in defiance of racist anti-union laws and KKK brutality.

When unions embrace class struggle, they can strike powerful blows against national oppression. In 1954, for instance, communists and Longshoremen union militants in Hawaii and California spearheaded the revolutionary movement that overthrew white minority rule on the islands. Amid the anti-union offensive of the 1980s, Chicano and Mexicano workers in California won a historic 18-month strike against Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food, challenging racist union officials and class collaboration in the process. Similarly, a militant minority of Black autoworkers

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed explanation of national oppression in the U.S. and its relationship to racism, see [National Oppression, National Liberation and Socialist Revolution and Immediate Demands for U.S. Colonies, Indigenous Peoples, and Oppressed Nationalities](#), available at [frso.org](#).

in Detroit formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement in 1968 to combat racist inequalities at work and white chauvinism in the union.

### ***Building the Strategic Alliance Through the Labor Movement***

A socialist revolution won't happen without national liberation. But the working class gains its power through its numbers and its capacity for solidarity, giving it a strategic and material interest in supporting the fight against racism and national oppression.

All serious socialists have to reckon with revolutionary strategy – how do we actually win? In Russia, the Bolsheviks saw the large numbers of peasants and realized they could only overthrow capitalism through a strategic alliance between the working class, a minority class that was growing, and the peasants, a majority class that was diminishing.



*Labor & immigrant rights solidarity at Minneapolis May Day.*

Based on the history and material reality of the United States, the FRSO also sees the need for a strategic alliance. We want to bring together anyone and everyone who has conflict with monopoly capitalism to overturn this system. It's a big tent strategy, although some parts of this big tent are more essential than others. The U.S. has a large multinational working class, but it also has powerful movements of oppressed nationalities, like the Black liberation struggle, which have shaken the ruling class throughout history. Our big tent strategy for revolution in the U.S. must have a strategic alliance between these two movements as its core.<sup>2</sup>

In concrete terms, socialists in the labor movement need to take up fights against racist discrimination at work and organize coworkers to do the same. While this often takes the form of fighting a racist manager or work policy, it's no secret that some white workers hold racist and chauvinistic attitudes. But unlike organizing on campus or in the community, labor is the one arena of struggle where the enemy chooses your mass base. We want principled unity among the working class. This doesn't mean we should coddle backwards views among union members, like so

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<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth look at the FRSO's strategy for revolution, see [Class in the U.S. and Our Strategy for Revolution](#), available at [frso.org](#).

many labor bureaucrats do. It means we commit to long-term struggle, rooted in practice and summation, against white chauvinism.

Transforming our unions into class struggle organizations opens new possibilities too. Class struggle unions can help in forging this strategic alliance by supporting the fights against national oppression. Take for instance immigrants, especially those from Mexico and Central America, who make up a growing part of the labor movement. The right-wing capitalists who back racist anti-immigrant policies are the same who target the labor movement. We have a common enemy, making it important for the labor movement to take up the struggle for immigrant and refugee rights.

### ***Women's Liberation & the Labor Movement***

Although the labor movement has its own problems with sexism, unions give women the fighting organizations necessary to strike at the root of the oppression faced today. Today women comprise almost half of all union members, earning 30.9% more per week than their non-union counterparts. Throughout U.S. history, working women have provided dauntless leadership in the labor movement, from the garment workers strikes of the early American republic to titans like Lucy Parsons, one of the IWW's co-founders. Militant women of all nationalities spearheaded the 1960s public sector strike wave, just as they would in the 2018 teachers strike wave. Socialists need to build on that legacy by confronting the abuse and harassment faced by working women today.

Women's oppression has its roots in class systems of private property. Whether in ancient empires, feudal kingdoms, or under modern capitalism, the ruling order has always forced women into subordinate positions, exploiting their labor both at home and in production, abusing their bodies, and denying their dignity.

Today it manifests in domestic and sexual violence, discrimination, wage inequality and more. Under capitalism, women are paid less based on their continuing role in replicating the working class. Women are expected to raise children and carry out most of the unpaid domestic labor for the family. By shifting the burden of necessary domestic labor onto women and the family, the capitalist class lowers the cost they must pay to reproduce the worker's labor power – the minimum wage. It heightens the exploitation of all workers.

Using both law and social customs to enforce their role as 'home-makers', the ruling class barred a subset of women from the paid workplace for centuries. When women did work, they received pitiful wages and suffered humiliation and degradation not experienced by their male counterparts. Black women under chattel slavery received no wages at all while also suffering untold sexual horrors at the hands of white plantation owners. Even after emancipation, Black and immigrant women had few if any workplace protections extended to their labor since the

National Labor Relations Act of 1935 specifically denied union rights to domestic workers.

To this day, women working without a union contract earn lower wages than men working in the same industry. Sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace remain widespread and unpunished. Unable to afford decent child care, working mothers are expected to balance full-time jobs while also raising their families.

To maintain this system of women's oppression, the ruling class stigmatizes and targets people who fall outside their ideal of a heterosexual nuclear family. Gay, lesbian and bisexual people, for instance, experience homophobia under capitalism because their family unit does not center on the generational reproduction of labor. Transgender people, similarly, face discrimination and violence under capitalism for rejecting the rigid gender norms at the root of women's oppression.

The entire working class has an interest in women's liberation, and socialists need to take up the fight on the shop floor. Concretely, this can mean battling sexist supervisors and managers, confronting sexual harassment on the job and challenging discriminatory work rules (i.e. pay gaps, job classification). Unions should take up the demands of working women for free child care and quality health care, and working men should struggle against male chauvinism when it manifests.

## **Building a Party of the Working Class in the United States**

At a certain point, the economic struggles of workers against bosses has to become a larger struggle for political power. Working class militancy has won incredible victories and life-changing reforms for workers and our families in every capitalist country. In the U.S., for instance, the tidal wave of sit-down strikes, factory occupations and work stoppages during the Great Depression won Social Security, bans on child labor, legal union rights, and more.

But these victories are never safe under capitalism. Slowly but surely, the ruling class fights to reverse our gains at every corner, whether through legal channels like austerity or through force using the state. That's abundantly clear in the U.S., especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Even in capitalist social democracies like Sweden and Norway, the working class saw their health care, housing, job security and more under attack.

If we want to actually secure a socialist future, the working class will have to overthrow the capitalist ruling class and take power for itself. To accomplish this Herculean task, the working class needs a fighting political organization of its own: a workers party, bringing together the best, most forward-thinking working class leaders and fighters. Armed with

the science of making revolution, this party sees the big picture, making it the tip of the spear in the struggle to overturn capitalism and create a socialist future. In every country that has a revolutionary workers movement, the fusion of the labor movement and the socialist movement takes the form of a communist party.

The Freedom Road Socialist Organization wants to see that party created in the United States, but we're not there yet. Socialists across the U.S. will have to bring Marxism back to the working class and become fighters in the class struggle. We don't want to sit around waiting for that to happen on its own, all while capitalism continues grinding down the working class, waging war on oppressed nations, and destroying the earth. The resurgence of socialism's popularity in the U.S. has opened revolutionary new doors, making possible things that just a few years ago seemed impossible.

We hope this new generation of socialists join with the FRSO and take up the task of fusion. The strategy outlined in this document guides our work in the labor movement today, as it has since our founding in 1985. The FRSO wants to see a renewed, fighting labor movement in the U.S. stronger than ever before. If you're interested in working to make that happen, come work with us.

Now is the time for socialists to become rank-and-file militants in the labor movement, leaders in the class struggle, revolutionary fighters for socialism, and raise high the banner, "Freedom in our lifetime." ★

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## **Sources & Continued Study**

For those interested in better understanding class struggle unionism, the labor movement and the fight for socialism in the United States, the following books helped shape this pamphlet:

- *Reviving the Strike: How Working People Can Regain Power and Transform America* by Joe Burns
- *Strike Back: Using the Militant Tactics of Labor's Past to Reignite Public Sector Unionism Today* by Joe Burns
- *Labor's Untold Story* by Richard O. Boyer
- *The History of the Communist Party of the United States* by William Z. Foster
- *American Trade Unionism* by William Z. Foster
- *Wage Labor & Capital* by Karl Marx
- *Fighting in Paradise: Labor Unions, Racism, and Communists in the Making of Modern Hawaii* by Gerald Horne

**FRSO**

*Freedom Road  
Socialist Organization*

**frso.org** | [info@frso.org](mailto:info@frso.org)

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