

Build

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INTRODUCTION

“We have a world to win.” Here in 2019, this phrase seems like a relic of the past. When Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto, the possibility of a socialist order seemed closer. The revolutionary wave that rocked the world at his time rose even higher into the next century, with socialism posing an ever-present existential threat to a capitalist global society.

Now, we stand in the ruins of the movements that preceded us. Countries, unions, and parties that once fought for socialism have either crumbled, ceded their power, or embraced their former enemies. ‘Revolution’ has become a word for idealists. And as the threat of climate disaster envelops us every more rapidly, the very world we’re supposed to fight for seems to be disappearing before our eyes.

What is the role of an organization like DSA in these times? Like a spirit refusing its own death, radical movements from BLM to DSA have swelled as political and economic degradation breathed life back into the very concept of socialism in the United States. It is a refusal of the “end of history” that the imperialist West’s ruling class triumphantly declared with the fall of the U.S.S.R.

With 55,000 members, well-known officeholders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, ever-increasing publicity, and the right wing’s fear-mongering, the organization has raised the red banner of socialism in the U.S. for the first time in the living memory of most current DSA members. But as we have grown over the past two years, the fundamental question looms ever more urgently: What is to be done?

If you posed this question to three different members of DSA, there is a decent chance you would get three different answers. Some conceive of socialist politics as a matter of internal will and democracy, a question of creating a

prefigurative space for socialism. This incorporates a desire to adjust bylaws by personal preference, focusing on internal taste and debates, and sidelining outward political activity. Such a conception of socialist politics looks at DSA and asks, “what do the members of DSA want it to be?” Another perspective conceives of DSA as advocates for neighborhoods and interest groups outside the organization, leading mobilizing or advocacy campaigns to local officials on their behalf. Here, the question is, “what does the working class want?”

But these questions don’t necessarily address power or societal relations at the bedrock level, and more importantly, how to change them. There isn’t a socialism to yet be found within an organization or a community, not even DSA. Our project isn’t to unearth an already existing socialist society hidden beneath us, but to make our present capitalist society become our future socialist one.

To accomplish this, we must engage with our political reality. This requires studying the existing dynamics of exploitation and domination within and across our communities, regions, and countries. One function of a socialist organization is to forge networks which tie together and sharpen our individual understanding of localized struggles into a collective understanding of a universal struggle. This collective understanding must consider the consequences of our actions, and what they mean for the strategies we’ve created.

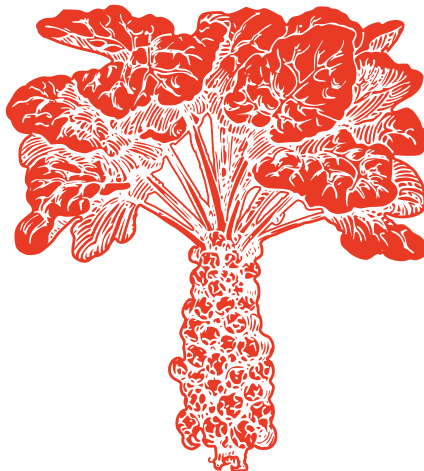
Our chapter in Metro Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky has won amazing victories. Members have saved the north building of Cincinnati’s downtown library from privatization, and successfully pressured officials to open two syringe exchange programs in the cities of Newport and Covington in Kentucky. Today, the chapter presses on with its work to open exchanges in Ohio, and continues to provide support for public employees in the region’s library systems.

As we analyze our past work and plan our future work, however, we do not value the raw achievement of immediate objectives as our guiding star. Rather, we orient our work around a more comprehensive focus which asks: "How are we connecting with the working class to forge the struggle against oppression into an ever-larger collective effort?"

A socialist organization cannot be designed in the abstract, nor can it be a community shaped solely by the interests of its existing members. A socialist organization is a tool that must constantly adapt in an effort to answer the elemental question: "What is needed for the working class to prevail in its struggle against oppression?" We must always place our work in a historical context, asking what must follow and how the struggle continues. Only by answering these questions can we build the strategic horizon necessary to cogently define our priorities and create effective organizational structures.

Our hope is this and future issues of Build can stimulate us to ask what our current situation is and what we should do in light of it, so we can, to borrow yet again from Marx, "make the petrified conditions dance by playing them their own tune."

Solidarity, comrades. We have a world to build.





Counterrevolutionary

**Can't betray the boss.
Been saving up money for
a really cute shirt.**

- Joanna Jia, East Bay DSA

PROJECTS & CAMPAIGNS





#ExposeFakeClinics: Discussing Reproductive Health Care

In Fall 2017, the Socialist Feminist Committee of Pittsburgh DSA launched a local Expose Fake Clinics campaign to spread information about crisis pregnancy centers in the Pittsburgh area. We joined a national campaign driven by the Abortion Access Hackathon and Lady Parts Justice League, along with over 50 partner organizations across the country, ranging from Arkansas Abortion Support Network to Austin NOW to Reproaction.

Crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) are obstacles to comprehensive reproductive health care that thrive thanks to gaps in our health care system and anti-abortion misinformation. Though they advertise themselves as locations to receive free services, they truly function as anti-abortion counseling centers. Their agenda is to pressure people to carry a pregnancy to term, and they use a number of different tactics to accomplish this goal.

CPCs open near and mirror the appearance of real abortion clinics. They perform medically unnecessary ultrasounds, and use them to coerce patients. Many are not medically licensed, and give misleading pregnancy-related information, such as telling patients to wait several weeks before scheduling an abortion, and using debunked studies on the effects of abortion services. Such practices delay access to legitimate health care, increase the cost of services, and block pregnant people from making fully informed decisions about their care. CPCs have vastly increased in number in the last twenty years, significantly outnumbering real abortion providers. Many states fund CPCs under the guise of family assistance and religious outreach, while religious programs privately

fund others. Meanwhile, actual abortion and reproductive health care providers struggle to stay open.

A Reproductive Justice Analysis

As our committee explored the issues surrounding health care access, we determined a reproductive justice analysis was necessary to accurately connect the topic to every social issue that affects people seeking health care. The concept of choice alone was insufficient, and a range of social justice issues connected to the topic of reproductive health.

The SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective coined the term “Reproductive Justice” in 1994. They defined it as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”¹ A Reproductive Justice analytical framework requires studying power systems, addressing intersecting oppressions, centering the most marginalized, and building coalitions to work across issues and identities.

We use this framework to address the topic of reproductive health care resources. CPCs impose upon and obstruct an individual’s right to maintain personal bodily autonomy. They also take advantage of many people’s lack of accessible health care options, which has a greater impact on marginalized groups, namely people of color.

Our reproductive justice analysis requires that we recognize a wide array of social justice issues and inequalities that affect access to comprehensive health care. As we engage with others regarding CPCs, we strive to move beyond the language of choice to acknowledge the interconnectedness of issues affecting people’s care. For example, racial disparities in the ability to obtain comprehensive reproductive health care are rampant across the U.S. As a result, black mothers are over three times more likely to die from complications

1 <https://www.sistersong.net/Reproductive-Justice>

during pregnancy and childbirth than white mothers.²

Among the additional issues we address in our conversations about fake clinics are a lack of affordable child care, prenatal care, and paid sick leave; opportunities to work for a livable wage; the quality of early childhood education; freedom from personal and state violence; the availability of public transportation; and a disparity between urban and rural areas in the number of facilities offering comprehensive reproductive health services. We also discuss Medicare-for-All and the exorbitant cost of healthcare in the United States.

Exposing Fake Clinics

Our primary goal is to help people learn how fake clinics act as obstacles to comprehensive reproductive health care.³ To accomplish this, we spread information in several ways. Because CPCs thrive by dominating search results for abortion services, our first step was creating a website.⁴ We aimed to help local people learn what to avoid as soon as they begin seeking reproductive health care.

The more our site is shared and clicked, the higher it appears in search results, so we hosted a website launch party to kickstart traffic. The party featured a photo booth where people could dress up in disguises with a sign that read, “Fakes Recognizing Fakes.” We encouraged people to increase the site’s visibility and link our local efforts to the national campaign by sharing their photos on social media using the hashtag #ExposeFakeClinics. In the week after the party, the site received 1,500 visits. Now, when patients search for abortion services in the area, our website appears near the top of the results, alongside the misinformation distributed by CPCs.

2 <https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternalinfanthealth/pregnancy-relatedmortality.htm>

3 ExposeFakeClinics.com

4 ExposeFakeClinicsPGH.com

Simultaneously, we also created pamphlets with information about fake clinics: what they are, how to spot them, and where people can go instead to get services they need. Two local artists contributed to this effort, with one designing the pamphlet, and the other creating an informational comic. At our committee and chapter meetings throughout the year, we solicited members to circulate these pamphlets around the city, including coffee shops, libraries, and residence halls. Essentially, anywhere and everywhere that people might see them.

Our next step was street canvassing, which involves standing outside CPCs and initiating conversations with patients and passersby about the reproductive health care people deserve. Our street canvassing campaign focuses on two local CPCs, Women's Choice Network and Birthright, both of which target students at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University. These CPCs lure students to their facilities by promising free ultrasounds and STD testing just a few blocks away. We combat these subversive tactics by arming people with the facts. By speaking with people on the street and sharing our pamphlet, we help them learn to identify and avoid CPCs. We also alert people to legitimate reproductive health care options, and share ideas about how to take action against CPCs in the area and support access.

Simply disrupting the quiet presence of these fake clinics has been surprisingly impactful. The CPCs we visit are located on streets that get significant foot traffic, especially from college students, but otherwise have inconspicuous signage and attract little attention. One clinic is located on the ground level of an apartment complex. After politely asking us to leave the premises, the landlord informed us that the clinic had promised it would not attract protesters as part of the unofficial terms of their lease. In fact, before our canvassing efforts, many tenants were unaware they shared space with a fake clinic. Some have since disclosed to us that the CPC has been a topic of conversation at tenant association meetings.

The other clinic we visit is located in an office complex and shares an entrance with numerous other organizations. Again, many workers were unaware they shared space with a CPC. Agitating these tenants and pressuring the landlords who allow these places to operate are part of our ongoing efforts to shut down these imposters. The fact that so many tenants who share spaces with the fake clinics are oblivious to their presence demonstrates not only how CPCs thrive in the shadows of deception and ignorance, but also our campaign's ability to expose them and their subversive tactics.

Coalition Work

Our chapter is working with our local abortion fund and independent reproductive health clinic, as well as other medical funds in the state. Last year, our committee raised over \$12,000 for Western PA Fund for Choice, whose funds go directly to patients to pay for transportation, childcare,



lodging, and medical costs for abortion services. We gathered these funds throughout the year, namely with fundraisers in April and December. These fundraisers also provided a platform to raise awareness about the cost of abortion, how the U.S.'s lack of free childcare and paid sick time affects people, how transportation issues serve as an obstacle to health care, and how CPCs get in the way.

As we continue our anti-CPC work, we are also building Pittsburgh DSA's organizational capabilities and relationships. Because reproductive justice is critical for the successful implementation of socialism, DSA must organize a vigorous program around reproductive health care access and the issues important to those it affects most. Our anti-CPC work is one piece of this program. Until reproductive justice is secured for everyone, we'll continue finding new ways to fight for bodily autonomy, fully informed choices regarding reproductive health, and the freedom to parent in safe and sustainable communities.

To learn more about the campaign to expose fake clinics, contact Pittsburgh DSA's Socialist Feminist Committee at: socfem@pghdsa.org.





Bronx/Upper Manhattan: DSA Community Garden Program

At 9 a.m., Maggie arrives at the garden with a cart containing homemade gardening supplies. She opens the gate and our day begins. Six of us from DSA are there to paint a supply shed and mount it on a brick foundation. Front to back, the 4,956 square foot community garden is incredibly well-kept. Even the bees politely stay in a small area designated for honey collection. Knowing Maggie provides much of the labor needed to maintain the garden, we know she could probably handle the shed too, even if we're not quite sure how. Then again, we're in "Maggie's Magic Garden." Some things here may just be a mystery.

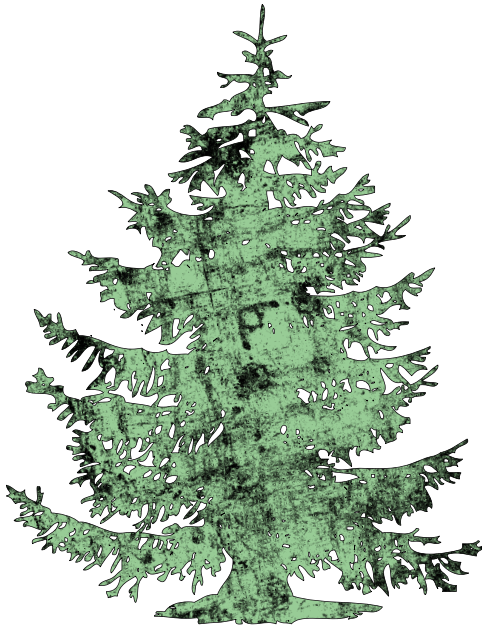
As the day progresses, however, we see why we're here. In the morning, tenants from buildings surrounding the garden stop by in their pajamas to drop off organic waste for composting. Maggie's friends periodically visit to talk about preparing for the fall. Parents stroll by with their kids, marvel at the greenery, and ask when the garden is open for a future visit. The garden is a hub of community activity. We're here in the middle of it all, laying bricks.

In June 2017, the Bronx/Upper Manhattan branch of NYC-DSA began coordinating action days at community gardens in Harlem and the South Bronx. Using the maps and contact info in NYC Greenthumb's citywide community garden directory, we emailed numerous gardens in Harlem and the Bronx to introduce ourselves, describe DSA's purpose, and offer assistance with their work. From the responses of garden stewards, we focused on four candidates comfortable with DSA politically and interested in hosting us to work. Next, we arranged in-person meetings with the garden stewards to learn their backgrounds and programs. Finally, we set

mutually agreed on dates, and promoted it to our members as an opportunity to engage with our communities. We've been continually scheduling action dates ever since. We chose to organize around urban gardens for four main reasons.

First, community gardens demonstrate the real-world practice of socialist principles. Over the past three decades, the capitalist class has advocated policies which increasingly incentivized the construction of luxury residential properties. Simultaneously, the capitalist class has also promoted the individual, rather than the collective, as the dominant force in politics, economics, and culture. Through these efforts, the capitalist class has isolated, disempowered, and displaced residents in New York City's working and middle class communities.

In contrast, community gardens endure as communal spaces in a rapidly gentrifying and hollowed-out urban center. Neighborhood residents frequently provide most of the labor and materials required to operate and maintain the gardens.



This unifies the community in a collective effort for everyone's benefit. The result of these efforts is nutritious produce, which starkly contrasts the unhealthy food typically sold at privately run stores in many lower income neighborhoods. As socialist organizers, supporting such positive real-world examples of our principles in practice is indispensable for political education.

Second, community gardens offer an opportunity to build the power of underserved and vulnerable communities. Our most frequent partner is Maggie's Magic Garden, which has been primarily operated since 1993 by Maria Magdalena Amurrio, an immigrant from Bolivia. Another of our partners, La Finca Del Sur, is a cooperative owned by Latina and Black women in the South Bronx. As women, people of color, and immigrants, the stewards of these gardens belong to some of the most exploited groups under racial capitalism.

Further, because the gardens mainly answer to the long-term residents of these communities, who are primarily in the working class, they can play an integral part of the fight against high-cost housing developers. By supporting these gardens, DSA is not only strengthening working class communities, but also building the power of particularly vulnerable groups within those communities.

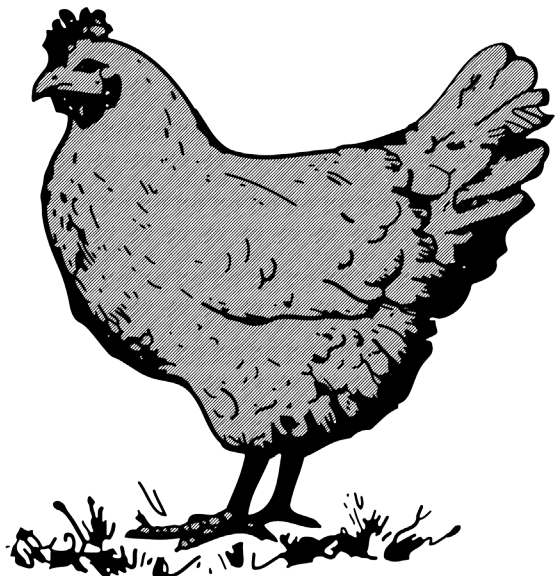
Third, community gardens offer a critical way to build DSA's organizational power. Our task is to organize a mass movement which restructures society around socialist principles. Although garden work may not help us immediately recruit hundreds of new members, we are building the trust in DSA necessary to develop meaningful relationships with other local organizations and residents. In the long-term this trust will allow us to recruit the larger and more diverse membership DSA needs to credibly act as organizers of the working class.

We have already seen success in this area with the gardens

themselves. The longer we've worked with each, the more they've been willing to offer the use of the gardens for meetings, flyering, and other events. As time goes by, we aim to maintain a consistent on-the-ground presence that enables us to continue growing our relationships and our membership's diversity.

Our belief in the importance of this trust also underscores our preference for this type of work over electoral work and certain canvassing projects closely associated with certain officials. Every election, political actors sell promises to working class communities, especially those of color. Because these promises frequently go unfulfilled, these communities can be understandably wary of such actors.

Instead, through direct action in gardens, we can immediately demonstrate palpable solidarity with those we hope to organize. If DSA doesn't support these populations where they live and struggle, how can we or they expect our electoral efforts to lead to anything different? We see our community garden program, and other community work, as a foundational crux for building a credible, diverse, and genuine working-class movement.



Fourth, we've found garden work is a nice shake-up for members! The hands-on activities and outdoor setting are a refreshing change from the formal meeting-and-trainings focus of more professional DSA events.

Organizing a mass movement to implement socialism will be a long, complex process. The first step is laying a durable foundation able to support the tremendous burden imposed by our struggle for liberation from the catastrophe of capitalism. In Harlem and the Bronx, we're building that foundation from the ground up, brick by brick.

To learn more about this community gardening program, contact the NYC-DSA Bronx/Upper Manhattan Branch at: bronx.uptown@socialists.nyc.





Silicon Valley DSA: Losing Our Voices, Finding Our Footing

Halloween can be awkward for adults. If you don't spend the evening with kids or live somewhere that trick-or-treating is popular, it can be an anti-climactic evening with too much fun-size candy left over. For Silicon Valley DSA, Halloween looked different this year. It was Day 28 of a strike by workers at the Marriott in downtown San José, California. After several days of emoji-laden text banking, nine of us donned costumes and joined the small evening crew of strikers on the picket line to "scare" Marriott into agreeing to a fair contract with its workers. This wasn't our first time on the line, and by now they knew our faces, if not our names. Together, we chanted: ***"Dirty rooms and spooky lights, Marriott workers strike all night!"***

Since Wednesday nights were slower for the hotel, the picket line also had fewer workers. This was especially true on Halloween, which many workers preferred to spend at home with their families. With this in mind, Silicon Valley DSA's labor working group mobilized for the event as a low-key, new member-friendly show of solidarity, costumes encouraged. Soon Sonic the Hedgehog and a walking pile of dirty hotel bed sheets joined the march, while a wizard flyered guests to encourage them to check out. Several new faces who came just to see the picket instead stayed for hours. As workers choreographed their chants, we practiced spooky voices on megaphones. What could have been a "ghost" picket shift with five workers not only felt like a real party, but also exemplified our tactics for strike solidarity. ***"What time is it? Check out time."***

In late 2017, roughly half a dozen members of Silicon Valley DSA (SV DSA) established the chapter's labor working

group. Our charter recognized worker-led unions as critical for building workplace democracy, finding that such organizations best empower workers to control the products and circumstances of their labor. In addition, we believed DSA's position enabled us to play an important tactical role in the labor movement through strike solidarity. Our organizational independence from unions provided valuable leeway for devising ways to make strikes more effective. We could also serve as community members in delegations to management, and escalate actions or media pressure when unions could not, due to strict labor laws. ***"Who's got the power? We've got the power. What kind of power? Union power."***

A year later in October 2018, nearly 8,000 Marriott workers struck in seven cities across the country, including San José, in the city's first-ever downtown hotel strike. Our working group seized the opportunity to put our charter's principles into action. Supporting unionized service industry workers in their fight for a fair contract was essential for us because it aligned with our goals while pushing us to build meaningful and durable coalitions. Although our group knew open-ended strikes (i.e., until demands are met) are rare today and picket lines are often mythologized, they rely on basic tools to succeed. These tools include: withholding labor, maintaining a physical presence on the line, and creating disruptive noise and spectacles that inconvenience management.

"¿Qué queremos? ¡Contrato! ¿Cuándo? ¡Ahora! What do we want? Contract! When do we want it? Now!"

We also knew solidarity would have felt performative if we only attended big rallies. Instead, a small but consistent DSA presence on the picket line helped us learn first-hand what the Marriott workers specifically needed and how to best fill those needs. In small moments talking with workers, they taught us what "One job should be enough" (the strike's nationwide slogan) meant to them. Workers focused on the struggles imposed by the rapid increase in the cost of



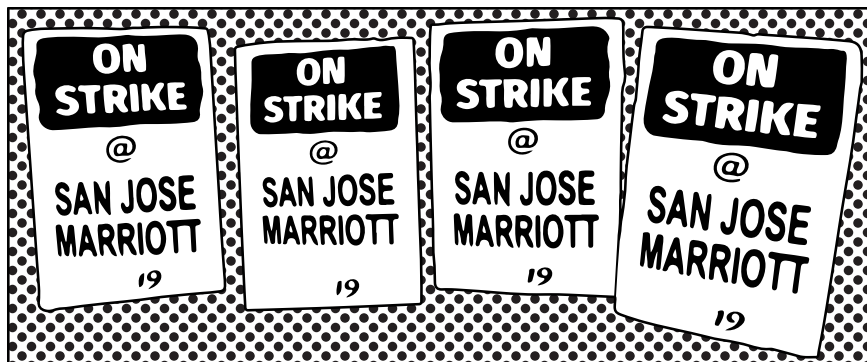
housing in San José and the threat of automation. Through these interactions, we got to know the workers as not just employees striving for fair labor conditions, but also as our neighbors and friends. ***“Marriott, Marriott look around: San José is a union town.”***

Based on these conversations and our background labor organizing knowledge, we strategized around three main goals: (1) supplying financial support for strikers, (2) supplying food for the picket line, and (3) creating spectacles to make the picket line more enjoyable for workers and more disruptive for the hotel. Because UNITE HERE! Local 19 was a relatively small local with less strike experience, its staff was excited to collaborate with us on inventive solidarity actions. Experimentation may not be possible for every DSA chapter supporting union efforts, but in our case acting with initiative and imagination, rather than waiting for instruction, worked well. ***“Marriott Marriott rich and rude, we don’t like your attitude.”***

Cooking up spectacles was the most creative aspect of our work. From dance performances to a novelty cake, silly ideas became power on the picket line. One member offered to bring her cornet, and at 7 a.m. the next morning she was up and ready to play reveille for guests crossing the line. Strikers gave her a wild reception, encouraging her to play while walking the line. Here and throughout the strike, the workers generously showed us the ropes when it came to annoying guests and being heard. ***“All day, all night, this hotel is on strike.”***

Sometimes we had to redefine the meaning of success for our efforts. In late October, the convention center adjacent to the Marriott hosted TwitchCon. Tens of thousands of gamers and gaming fans crowded the streets all weekend. Many attended convention events in the Marriott’s ballrooms or stayed at the Marriott while the strike continued. As drunken attendees approached the line or badgered workers, we developed a plan to insulate the picketers from uninformed visitors and divert the negative energy of the attendees in a positive direction. Over two days, we distributed flyers explaining why hotel workers were striking, directed attendees to the strike solidarity fund, and invited convention-goers to join a “picket line party” on Saturday evening. ***“Respect our work, respect our time, do not cross our picket line.”***

Despite us passing out nearly 1,000 flyers and having great conversations with convention attendees about the strike, only one person from TwitchCon attended our picket party, and almost nobody joined the picket line. Yet, at the same time, convention goers contributed to a noticeable uptick in strike solidarity fund donations. Being persistently visible also attracted media attention, as the popular gaming news blog [Kotaku](#) covered the strike, and one SV DSA member spoke to [The Nation](#) about labor issues in streaming services such as Twitch. The experience taught us sometimes success doesn’t come in the ways you always expect, and reminded us that there isn’t a clear-cut formula or measure for a successful



action. ***“Don’t check in, check out! Don’t check in, check out!”***

Walking the picket line can be loud and intense, but it also frequently offers opportunities for reflection. Fighting capitalism can start with a single workplace and clear, worker-generated demands. In this case, workers at 21 hotels in seven cities took on the largest hotel chain in the world and won. Their victory continues to inspire us and other workers, unionized or not, to realize their collective power. ***“Who’s in the fight? Local 19. Who’s gonna win? Local 19.”***

Over 37 days, we found, lost, and found our voices again. Those who worked on strike solidarity are no longer “comrades” as a generic descriptor; we are bonded by the experience of collective action. Together, we fought sleep deprivation and did things that terrified us. Our comrades became the first people we texted in the morning and the last ones we texted at night. We are already looking for the next reason to pull out our communally-painted “DSA [heart emoji]s union workers” banner. Now that we know the breathtaking feeling of shifting from *Sí se puede* to *Sí se pudo*, we are more prepared than ever to build power for the working class. ***“Sin contrato, no hay paz. Sin respeto, no hay paz. Sin dinero, no hay paz. Sin justicia, no hay paz.”*** [No contract, no peace. No respect, no peace. No money, no peace. No justice, no peace.]

Silicon Valley DSA hopes you enjoyed the chants included throughout this piece. Like all great chants, they are meant to be shared far and wide, so bring them to a picket or protest near you! You can also read more about the specific solidarity actions we did in our [SV DSA Strike Solidarity Kit](#). We hope this demonstrates that much of our work can be replicated by others with substantial rewards for both workers and our organization. ***“Marriott, escucha, estamos en la lucha”*** [Marriott, listen up, we are in the fight].

To learn more about DSA’s work supporting striking Marriott workers, contact Silicon Valley DSA at: info@siliconvalleydsa.org.





North Central West Virginia: Black and Pink Holiday Card Party

On December 5, 2019, North Central West Virginia DSA held its second annual Black and Pink Holiday Card Party at Apothecary Ale House and Café in Morgantown, West Virginia.

Black and Pink is an open family of LGBTQ prisoners and “free world” allies dedicated to the abolition of the prison industrial complex. During the holiday season, they allow groups such as ours to request a specified number of non-denominational holiday cards that come pre-addressed to incarcerated persons in their database of pen-pals.

Given the prevalence of prisons in Appalachia and our organization’s goal of prison abolition, we believe it is critical for chapters such as ours to support those on the inside. Hosting a holiday card party fit right in! The holidays can be a challenging and lonely time when you’re locked up and away from loved ones, especially for our LGBTQ friends. Receiving a holiday card helps let a person know they are not forgotten.

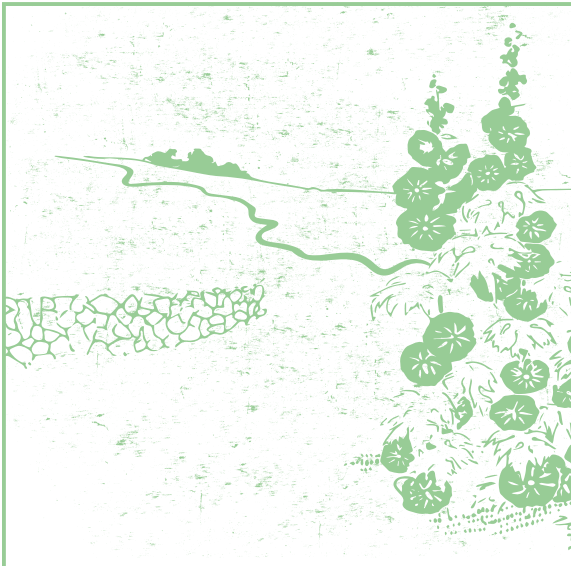
We first heard about Black and Pink’s holiday card program last year through Mariame Kaba (@prisonculture) on Twitter. Unfortunately, we didn’t have a lot of time to plan our party, so we had to provide our own cards and print our own address labels. We also didn’t get much of a chance to promote the event.

This year we were able to give enough notice to receive the pre-addressed cards. We began pushing the event well ahead of time on our social media accounts. We worked with the WVU LGBTQ+ Center to promote each others’ Black and Pink events. We even distributed flyers at a drag show where

we were previously asked to table.

This December, we had about a dozen people from our chapter and the community come together (despite the snow!) to decorate and write a total of forty holiday cards. We provided our guests with cookies and candy canes, and they provided us with enough donations to cover postage. It was a successful event that gave us the opportunity to engage some new and potential members, while giving everyone the chance to make a difference, however small, in the lives of people who need it.

To learn more about NCWV DSA's support for incarcerated persons, contact the North Central West Virginia DSA at: ncwvdsa@gmail.com.



Middle Class

One day I'll be my
Boss. Only two promotions
away from the rich.

- Joanna Jia, East Bay DSA





Richmond, VA: The People's Survey

Background and Purpose

The Richmond People's Survey is a base-building project that emerged from collaboration among comrades of the Richmond chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the Richmond branch of the Organization for a Free Society (OFS) in the winter of 2018.

Because Richmond lacks independent working class organizations, Richmond DSA focuses on popular organizing strategies rooted in mutual aid programs and coalition-building. Similarly, OFS is a cadre organization working to build a popular base for social revolution through grassroots organizing, with a collective praxis rooted in visions of a queer and trans feminist, decolonial, participatory, and ecological communism. At present, Richmond OFS has more than a dozen members organized into five clusters: the Richmond Feminist Collective, Free University, Uprising Cinema, Teachers Inquiry Project, and People's Survey. Richmond DSA and OFS have collaborated on several projects prior to the People's Survey, including the International Women's Strike and the Richmond May Day Coalition.

The People's Survey aims to assist the construction of an independent, grassroots, and rank-and-file working class organization by combining methods of grassroots community research with people power organizing. We chose to conduct community research because we believe organizers must develop projects and campaigns based on "a concrete assessment of concrete conditions." In other words, a

program for action must arise directly from the needs and desires articulated at the base.

In addition, militant community research does more than merely furnish “hard data” on the material living conditions of working class communities in various neighborhoods and institutions. Such research provides a more comprehensive map of our operational terrain, revealing the contours of power structures within and across communities. The methods deployed by researcher-organizers can assist the formation of lasting interpersonal networks rooted in solidarity, comradeship, mutual aid, and common experiences of struggle.

Through the People’s Survey, we believe grassroots socialist/ communist organizers can learn from and apply the organizing principles of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, or Zapatista National Liberation Army), a revolutionary movement of primarily Indigenous communities



based in Chiapas, Mexico. In particular, we have embraced the Zapatista principles of *mandar obedeciendo* (“leading by obeying” - organizers should follow the needs and desires of the broader working class community); and *proponer y no imponer* (“propose and don’t impose” - organizers should only propose ideas to receive feedback from the community, with the people ultimately deciding the course of action).

Survey Design, Implementation, and Revision

The initial survey had two sections. Section one posed several Likert scale questions regarding transportation, education, policing, etc. (i.e. “Do you worry about being able to make rent, about maintenance or poor upkeep from your landlord, or about being forced out of your home? Please circle your level of concern.”). Section two posed open-ended questions to facilitate broader conversations on the respondent’s needs and desires (i.e. “What is the most significant issue that you would like to see your community work to address?”).

This initial survey was revised through trial and error, and ultimately proved to be too broad to be useful in the long-term. However, we believe community research is a social and iterative process, necessarily moving from the general to the concrete through multiple rounds of social investigation. In this sense, the initial broad survey helped researcher-organizers develop a common orientation. Once concrete issues are identified, we can assist the process of connecting particular local struggles to systemic dynamics.

To ensure the survey’s effective implementation, we organized educational sessions on local history, research and organizing basics, and digital security for data collection and storage. We also conducted preliminary observational research at various sites (i.e. bus transfer stations, shopping plazas, public housing, etc.) to determine the suitability of potential survey locations. Finally, in order to cover more ground, we conducted survey research in small teams. Over

the past year, we have conducted the survey with more than 150 people.

Responses and Impacts

Through our research-organizing teams, we have made new friends and comrades at Richmond's main bus transfer station, the Southside Plaza shopping center, and the Hillside Court public housing complex. Based on an analysis of our collective capacities, we've decided to concentrate our efforts in Hillside Court, whose primarily Black residents (99%) live in Richmond's largest food desert and lack many basic necessities, such as functioning heating systems, community-controlled public spaces, playgrounds for children, etc. With an average household income of \$8,500 and a 70% unemployment rate, Hillside encapsulates many of the core contradictions of racial capitalism within the U.S. empire. Like most public housing complexes, Hillside is geospatially designed to enable the rapid deployment of police occupation forces, and is secluded from neighboring communities.

While Hillside residents were particularly responsive to the People's Survey, and showed interest in attending mass meetings co-hosted by researcher-organizers at the Hull Street Library, we have had difficulties soliciting resident participation. Following a self-critical assessment, we concluded that we needed to change our strategy, and show we could establish meaningful mutual aid programs within Hillside itself. It was unreasonable to expect residents to attend a meeting beyond walking distance with members of an organization yet to prove its ability to challenge and transform the conditions of everyday life.

Our first step in changing direction has been to shift our primary emphasis from surveying to organizing mutual aid. Rather than conceive of these difficulties in terms of setback or failure, we recognize them for what they are: the limits of the project's first phase. We started the survey without

defined objectives, and came to learn that Hillside residents had immediate needs that could be directly met by our group in order to establish lasting bonds of trust and solidarity. Forming these bonds lays the basis for more direct challenges to the local power structure in the immediate future.

As with many organizing projects, the moment presented itself when a sewage line ruptured, filling one residential block with sewage waste and the stench of sulfur. As we mucked through the sewage to conduct our usual survey work, residents informed us that their water was non-potable, and coming out brown from the tap. One resident shared their experience: "With a lot of bleach, I'll use it to wash dishes. But that's about it."

On investigation, it became clear this was a common problem, so we asked if providing free bottled water would be useful. Receiving an affirmative response, we set about distributing free water for the week, and requested for a comrade who works as a chemist to conduct water quality testing through their laboratory. We hope this integration of the social and material sciences with grassroots political militancy will set a methodological precedent for future organizing projects in Richmond.

The sewage leak affected 18 units in the housing block, so we purchased and distributed 18 crates of bottled water. Attached to each crate was a leaflet reading:

CLEAN WATER IS A HUMAN RIGHT!

Dirty water is the product of a dirty system - the capitalist system - that concentrates wealth and power in the hands of the few at the expense of the many.

This water is provided for by the Richmond People's Survey, an independent working class organization that believes in housing fit for the shelter of human beings, clean water and nutritious

food for all, safe and beautiful living environments, and collective control of the decisions that affect our lives and the resources on which we depend.

Based on our survey of more than 100 Hillside residents, it's clear that RRHA is failing to provide basic services, such as clean drinking water, proper sanitation, and adequate heating. If you are interested in organizing against these injustices and holding RRHA accountable, please contact the Richmond People's Survey. All Power to the People!

The following week, we again distributed water within the same block, while expanding outward to open conversations with neighbors of the next block over. This second round of water distribution opened space for deeper conversations. Residents invited us into their homes and showed us problems ranging from mold infestation to leaky plumbing. Through these conversations and regular weekly communication, we have solicited more community participants and arranged to have a springtime barbecue and public organizing meeting hosted by a resident community leader.

This work manifests our aim to build people power infrastructure by combining social and material sciences, ethnography, and political organization through patient conversations and mobilization. This infrastructure is cultivating a more comprehensive understanding of the interlocking social, technological, and ecological factors that shape everyday life for Hillside residents, and developing popular political forms that can effectively challenge and radically transform the conditions of everyday life toward greater freedom and equality.

Conclusion

We hope conducting the survey, aggregating and publishing research results, building a network of researcher-organizers and community leaders, and hosting mass meetings will enable us to co-design and co-organize projects rooted in the needs and desires directly articulated by respondents.

By conducting the People’s Survey, we hope to have made a minor contribution toward the politicization of public spaces and the construction of alliances grounded in the principle of autonomy within solidarity. We can continue to help build the power necessary to liberate and defend space for the self-organization of the class to whom the future belongs: the international working class.

This article was co-authored by members of Richmond DSA and Richmond OFS. To learn more about OFS, visit afreesociety.org or email: organizationforafreesociety@riseup.net.

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READING COMMENTARY

Daughter of Earth (1929)

Daughter of Earth is the story of Marie Rogers, a young woman, thirty years old as she stands at the edge of a Danish sea and retells, in the manner of the great novelists of remembrance, her life. Unlike those men-writers of remembrance, though, nostalgia is absent. Or, nostalgia would be absurd, even grotesque, because what she remembers us into is a life of a proletarian woman in the Mid- and Southwest in the early 20th century.

From her vantage point at the edge of the Danish sea, Rogers reveals to us the expanse of a struggle that has outlived her and her author, Agnes Smedley. The struggle is towards socialism, certainly, as Rogers' younger life of brutal poverty—her mother's economic dependence on a husband whose heart and mind and body have been destroyed by bosses, by mining companies, by the vagaries of weather by which those without the means of suitable shelter are battered like shallow-rooted trees, like birds unable to migrate for want of cashflow—prime a young Rogers for a commitment to life on the left.

But more critically, Rogers' struggle becomes of the left. As socialism offers her a language (which is power) through which to struggle against the structural oppressor of capital, she nevertheless encounters within that language an identical powerlessness to that perpetuated by capital: an ongoing silencing specific to women, to female bodies making the mighty attempt of struggling alongside male bodies. In socialism broadly, Rogers finds yet another language, becoming deeply invested in the Indian liberation movement, but here again she finds for all the rhetoric of liberation, the violence of silencing, violence perpetrated and perpetuated in its uniquely gendered, i.e. sexual, form.

Wikipedia calls this book an “autobiographical novel,” and certainly its author used her own life to shape the story.

However I reject qualifiers of “novel”—such adjectives do the work of qualifying, diminishing, positioning.

“Autobiographical novel” signals to the left that this is “safe” literature, i.e. that we read this and can use it as text because it really happened. The materialism is indeed historical. But literature must be read for precisely its unreality. The unreality of literature is praxis. It is the compiling of what-if?s, an enormous effort of imagination: asking, and answering, “What shall come to pass, if material conditions are thus? When what comes to pass does come, what will be the material effects on real people, or people who look and sound and suffer precisely as real people do?”

Daughter of Earth is inspiring and should be read for its glorious portrait of a woman committed to the liberation of all people everywhere, through her belief in socialism. But *Daughter* must also be read for its cautions. It reminds us, emotionally and intellectually in the way only great literature can, that the language of solidarity, powerful indeed as it is, is not a bulwark for violence that has always been and continues to be exercised against those who are not male, through gendered power, political power, social power. It is only by dismantling the violence inside our own struggle that we will achieve anything close to the vision of socialism we strive relentlessly towards.

Haleh Roshan is an Iranian-American writer and DSA member in New York City. Hang out with/commission her @halehroshan.



COMMUNIST COOKBOOK

Dan's Vegan Chocolate Cake Recipe

As long as I've been involved in DSA, I've baked treats for Providence DSA's Thursday night general meetings. Breads, pastries, cakes, pies. I make something for everyone: vegan, gluten-free, nut-free, whatever people need to do socialism with a little sustenance in their belly. I'm not a particularly sociable person, so I use the snacks as way to welcome people to our meetings, whether it's their first meeting or their fifteenth meeting. When people walk in the door, I get a chance to ask if they want a name tag, a seltzer, a newsletter, a slice of warm cake, and maybe a little light conversation. Just a little something to let them know that everyone who walks in the door can help us work together to build a better future.

This is my Vegan Chocolate Cake. Fluffy, light, chocolatey, and great frosted, covered in raspberry jam, or with just a bunch of powdered sugar on.

Equipment

13x9" cake pan
Oven
Sifter or wire mesh strainer
Large mixing bowl

Ingredients

3 cup all-purpose flour
1/2 cup cocoa powder
2 1/4 cup granulated sugar
2 teaspoon baking soda
2 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon salt
3/4 cup canola oil
2 cups water

Directions

Step 1 – Preheat oven to 350°F.

Step 2 – Sift the cocoa powder, flour, baking soda, salt, and sugar together into a large bowl.

One thing that helps when you make a cake is sifting the dry ingredients together! This is doubly true when you're adding cocoa powder so you get a nice, even chocolate mix.

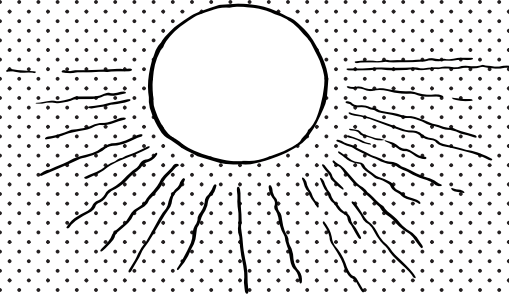
Chemistry Lesson: what happens when you mix baking soda and vinegar? BUBBLES! Guess what makes cakes light and fluffy?! BUBBLES! When you add the liquid to the dry ingredients in Step 3, mix quickly so it captures all the bubbles and keeps the cake light.

Step 3 – Add vinegar, vanilla, oil, and water to dry ingredients, and whisk to thoroughly combine. Quickly pour into cake pan using the spatula and smooth until even in the pan. Place on the middle rack of the oven.

When you're baking, you have a lot of variables to deal with: your oven, your pan, where you live, and humidity can all affect the exact timing. That's why it's important to test your cake in Step 4! A knife, a toothpick, something so that when you poke the cake, it comes out clean – that's important!

Step 4 – Bake for roughly 25 minutes, maybe a little less, a little more. Let cool for 10 minutes and turn out onto a very large platter commemorating the Haymarket Riot. If you don't have that, store bought parchment paper will do. Top with whatever you and your comrades want.





The magnificent trumpet tones of Hebrew Scripture, transmuted and oddly changed, became a strange new gospel. All that was Beauty, all that was Love, all that was Truth, stood on top of these mad mornings and sang with the stars. A great human sob shrieked in the wind, and tossed its tears upon the sea—free, free, free.

– W. E. B. Du Bois on Emancipation (*Black Reconstruction in America*, 1935)



Build

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the new world will
rise up from below

