

On Protagonism

By John Lewis

For my instance of the Red Start, I decided to focus on the concept of protagonism in socialist movements. The idea of protagonism, elaborated by Marta Harnecker in her writing on the Latin American left, involves cultivating the active participation, political subjectivity, and leadership of the masses in societal change. To examine protagonism in theory and in practice, I selected the following works: LeftRoots' ["Developing Mass Protagonism"](#), ["Ideas for Struggle #2: Convince, Not Impose"](#) by Marta Harnecker, and ["Protagonism and Productivity"](#) by Michael Lebowitz. These pieces consist of an evaluation and summary of the key points of protagonism, some underlying theory of protagonism, and an examination of protagonism in practice in Venezuela.

"Developing Mass Protagonism" introduces, defines, and evaluates protagonism in practice in a variety of organizations. This piece provides a simple definition that readers and attendees can pick up on and grasp – a useful intervention as much of the primary material on protagonism has not been translated and is not readily available.. The three organizations evaluated – Desis Rising Up and Moving, Youth United for Change, and Power U Center for Social Change – serve as a useful primer to consider the internal relationships and power structures within our organizing spaces. The list of interventions and methodologies at the end of the piece is actionable and easy for the audience to apply to their own organizing conditions. After reading this work, an attendee would be able to develop a basic understanding of protagonism, and what it can look like in organizational settings.

In "Convince, Not Impose", Marta Harnecker lays out some of the underlying ideas of protagonism. She pulls from practice and ideas on how anti-capitalist organizations can make socialist politics popular and counter neoliberalism, and also cautions against organizations attempting to impose hegemony on the movements they participate in, underscoring the continuous nature of the battle for hegemony both within movements and society writ large. She lays a foundation for how an organization can support the influx of already-existing protagonists and also maintain and continue their development. As a protagonist is someone empowered to take action and take charge of their liberation, she notes that individuals activated as such are key to a revolution.

"Protagonism and Productivity" by Michael Lebowitz details some examples of protagonist-democracy in Venezuela and how Hugo Chavez's government tried to ensure this operated in practice. It notes the underlying ideas and public policy implementations – particularly the Bolivarian communes – alongside tying the practice to human development, stressing that the dialectical method of learning from social action must be practiced continuously, or it will atrophy. This piece gives a practical example of the necessity of protagonism for socialist projects: as people become protagonists in their social context, this is key to them being remade as socialists. It also dovetails with Harnecker's ideas in the prior piece: the socialist project must always be fighting the battle for hegemony, even within its own movement structures.

The concept of protagonism is a useful one to apply as we consider DSA's role in incorporating experienced organizers and developing new members alike. Many DSA members – likely a sizable chunk of our active core – pride ourselves on being socialist organizers, and the notion of an “organization of organizers” is popular among many of DSA's internal factions. But protagonism offers a way to examine the constituent components of what an organizer does, and who an organizer is: it encompasses everything from exercising day-to-day skills and habits to articulating the contradictions of a particular context to acting in a way that produces and reinforces political subjectivity. Protagonism demands that our work as socialists and as organizers expose and expand subjectivity as a precondition for all revolutionary activity.