Protagonism, Socialist Leadership & Socialist Organization

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“Socialists have to be made”

-Hugo Chavez. Alo Presidente (No. 279)

- **Original Source**
    - Developing Mass Protagonism
        - The article "Developing Mass Protagonism" on LeftRoots Journal discusses the concept of mass protagonism, which is defined as the active participation and leadership of the masses in societal change. The author argues that this concept is crucial for achieving social transformation and should be a central focus of socialist strategies. The article explores the historical context of mass protagonism, its importance in the struggle for social justice, and how it can be fostered and developed in contemporary movements. The author emphasizes the need for political education and the development of organizational structures that encourage mass participation and leadership.
    - Ideas on Struggle
        - Ideas on Methods of Struggle by Marta Harnecker part of a collection of short essays. In topic #2 she suggests winning people over to socialism and having more and more people adopt the ideas of the organization as a measure of success, in which they then help carry forward socialist politics.
    - Protagonism and Productivity
        - On Protagonism and Latin American Socialism with Michael Lebowitz by examining Venezuela and the government of Hugo Chavez. This article dives into protagonism’s ties to human development.

Developing Mass Protagonism

- Left Roots (2020)

We begin by examining the idea of 'protagonism'—its meaning, its origins, and its implications for socialists today. We then look at some objective factors in the current conjuncture that shape the possibilities of protagonism right now. Then we dive into our three case studies. The lessons from these on-the-ground experiments lead us to propose a general approach to developing members of mass-based organizations as revolutionary protagonists.

What do we mean by protagonism?

One shortcoming of 20th century socialist experiments was their tendency to lose track of the importance of everyday people's control over collective public life. Often, leftists talk about this simply cas a lack of commitment to, or deficiency in the practice of, 'democracy'. LeftRoots cadres have found this framework unsatisfying. Uses of the term 'democracy' are so varied, and often contradictory, that the most socialist-friendly readings can often get lost or become difficult to communicate. Without discounting, dismissing, or abandoning the profound importance of democracy as a political tradition (or set of traditions), LeftRoots has looked to another, complementary framework to sharpen its understanding of the complex of principles, practices, capacities, and commitments around individual and collective life and action: protagonism.

LeftRoots first encountered protagonism in the work of the late Chilean Marxist Marta Harnecker. While protagonism as a political concept has some history in Latin America, it is largely unknown in the English-speaking world. This has given LeftRoots license to take what it gathered from Harnecker and others, and adapt it to its own conditions and vision.

Part of protagonism is the ability of everyday people to be the subjects, not objects, of their own individual (private) and collective (historical) stories—to be protagonists. (This is the sense of the word most clearly linked to the common literary use of 'protagonist' in English.) Such subjectivity requires

that people see themselves as actors who can shape social conditions for the collective good, and take collective responsibility and action for their shared liberation.

LeftRoots sees the development of protagonism as vital to revolutionary movements in both the short and long terms. This is, of course, borne in part of our basic values and vision for a fair and just society: put (overly) simply, people should have a say in the things that affect them. But protagonism is also a strategic imperative. If people have not developed both the capacities and the collective sense of self required to build and take responsibility for socialism, they will not be willing or able to defend it against either outright attacks from capital (foreign or domestic) or the resilient creep of bourgeois hegemony.

Protagonism is not a static character trait, or a set of checkboxes to mark off in designing a campaign or organization. It is a dynamic and complex collective practice that requires active engagement. A static notion of protagonism will lead to harmful oversimplification. With a dynamic understanding, what is 'protagonist' varies according to concrete conditions; it is not uniform or dogmatic. This dynamic, active conception can spark everyday people's transformation into historical subjects who can determine a course for humanity consistent with their vision and intention. Just as protagonist practice fundamentally transforms people as they develop and exercise it, protagonism itself evolves and develops over time. Its challenges and imperatives and rewards change along with the people's conditions and capacities.

The Current Conjuncture

Before looking at our own experiences in social movements, it will be helpful to touch briefly on some of the objective factors setting limits and exerting pressures on the possibilities of protagonism in the current moment. In particular, certain dynamics in the current conjuncture condition working-class people of color and immigrants to neither act nor see themselves as protagonists.

Forty years of neoliberal hegemony have restricted social safety net programs like food stamps, have made housing, healthcare, and education increasingly unaffordable, and have driven down wages. These treacherous conditions compel many working-class people to take multiple jobs, limiting their ability to participate in organizing efforts or other collective, protagonist activity. Beyond material hardship, neoliberalism has cemented an intense individualism in both ideology and social structure, along with a narrative that history is over and there is no alternative to capitalism. The resulting alienation and hopelessness make it difficult for most people to imagine being or becoming the kind of protagonists we are describing.

This process begins early. Schools with large populations of poor black and brown students tend to prioritize disciplining young people over developing their intellectual and leadership capacities. From a young age, black and brown workers are criminalized, suspended, arrested, denied a living wage, and forced to endure hazardous working conditions. Excessive policing, economic precarity, the threat of deportation, and the constant barrage of experiences great and small that seem to suggest their contributions, their lives—their humanity—are cheap, all act together to rob many of opportunities to develop their intellectual and practical capacities—in effect, to train them *not* to be protagonists. They learn to be invisible, to conform and obey rules without thought in hopes that this will allow them to stay safe and survive.

Ethnic-linguistic chauvinism and class oppression delegitimize the expertise of poor people and immigrants. Those most devastated by the current political, economic, and social systems are made to believe that they know nothing about the economy despite being fully aware that their wages are not sufficient to sustain their families and their livelihoods, and are unfair when compared to their bosses'. This socializes poor people and immigrants to defer to the wealthy, the educated, and, most relevant to our purposes here, those in positions of authority.

Structural class oppression in society at large also finds expression within social movement organizations. These organizations are often overly hierarchical, keeping the most important organizational responsibilities in the hands of staff or lead organizers and leaving members without the opportunity to develop as protagonists. They also can tend toward rigidity and static thought and practice. Custom, rather than concrete analysis, determines the work. Lastly, many organizers find it difficult to let go of responsibilities with which they have gained skill and facility. They both guard these responsibilities jealously against others' participation and hesitate to branch into areas where they have little experience or expertise. This pushes members to rely too much on lead organizers and staff to move organizational work forward, rather than to take collective responsibility and develop the skills and experience necessary to participate in advancing that work.

It is in these conditions that our organizations have undertaken their experiments in developing people's protagonism.

Looking at our experience in the social movements

The particulars of how to apply and advance protagonism within U.S. contexts have yet to be spelled out. The authors have all helped lead mass organizations with a focus on developing members in struggles for justice and equity. Though these social movement organizations are not explicitly revolutionary, much of their leadership is. This has created opportunities in each to experiment with how to foster protagonism among working-class people. And the authors' connections with one another—through LeftRoots and other social movement activity—have opened the door for us to discuss these experiments together. Those conversations have yielded what we think are some key lessons about how to build protagonism here and now, lessons that can be applied across many different social movement sectors.

For each organization, we describe the *status quo ante*—how things were before the organization made a concerted effort to develop people as protagonists. Then we discuss the interventions the group made to foster more protagonism. Finally, we look at the results of those interventions.

After looking at each organization individually, we pull out some key themes and shared lessons.

Desis Rising Up and Moving

Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) is a multigenerational, membership-based organization in New York City that builds the leadership of working-class South Asian and Indo-Caribbean immigrants, workers, and young people to make social and policy change that impacts their own lives. It fights for justice on issues of race and immigration, education, gender, and workers' rights. DRUM has chapters in Jackson Heights, Queens (its oldest, active for 20 years); Richmond Hill, Queens; Kensington, Brooklyn; and Parkchester, Bronx.

DRUM has two primary spaces for member engagement. The first is monthly membership meetings, which discuss active organizational campaigns and pressing issues in members' communities. The second is the committees that move organizational campaigns forward.

The way things were

DRUM has always prioritized developing its members as leaders. Grounded in left politics, it has helped members sharpen their political analysis, build their organizing skills, and learn how to make sharp and helpful interventions in campaigns and movements.

But DRUM has also operated in some ways that have stunted members' growth as protagonists. Its non-profit structure has pushed it toward policy campaigns. The coalitional nature of those campaigns has required a high degree of relationship building with other organizations. Together, these factors have worked to limit deeper participation in campaigns to paid staff organizers who can work on these matters full time.

So, though they have developed their political analysis, DRUM members depend greatly on staff to provide direction and the political context and assessments that are the basis for making decisions and taking action. Staff organizers usually direct members on how to carry out those strategies (with staff supervision), whether it is conducting street outreach and base recruitment, speaking at a rally, or mobilizing for an action. Members rely on staff to provide political clarity. Even leaders within the membership, who are selected by staff members because of their consistent and deep involvement in the organization and have some decision-making power, often take cues from staff when exercising that power. So while members have historically been able to develop certain skills and capacities in DRUM, the centrality of the staff stunted their growth as protagonists, particularly in terms of making decisions and taking action.

DRUM's protagonist intervention

In late 2018, the staff gender justice organizer evaluated the prior three years of DRUM's gender justice work. Their assessment was that it was not producing protagonists. They also found that the program suffered from a lack of institutional support during the first year, which led those involved to experience it as disconnected from the work and structure of the larger organization. By the end of the first year, many members involved in the gender justice work had left the organization altogether.

During the evaluation, members said that they wanted the gender justice program to be a permanent and integrated campaign of the organization. They also wanted it to involve various generations and genders. Incorporating this feedback, DRUM restructured the program as the Gender Justice Committee (GJC) in 2019, which included many of the same members who participated in the evaluation. Seeing their feedback take institutional form and lead to concrete action increased members' investment in DRUM and the GJC.

Recruitment

While building the GJC, staff looked for members who fulfilled two criteria. First, they had substantial experience in DRUM: they had joined DRUM before the GJC formed, had experience in taking up leadership in the organization, and understood the organization's principles of grassroots organizing. Second, they articulated a commitment to gender justice and to working individually to grow the GJC. In other words, recruitment was based on a combination of demonstrated practice and political or ideological commitment.

Orientation and training

Though the members of the new committee had worked with the organization and on its campaigns, they did not come into the committee with the experience or capacities to be active protagonists in the way that DRUM staff, particularly those in LeftRoots, were beginning to see as essential. On joining the GJC, committee members participated in three months of political education and praxis to give them a basic foundation upon which to build their protagonism over time. They studied gender justice more deeply and got training in basic organizing skills, like building one-to-one relationships, street outreach, power mapping, and campaign strategy. As part of their training, new committee members went into the community to talk to people about the gender justice issues they face. They also practiced recruiting—both bringing other DRUM members specifically into the Gender Justice Committee, and getting community people to join DRUM as new members. DRUM plans for this new process of political education and praxis to be ongoing within the Gender Justice Committee.

Initial responsibilities

At first, committee members were responsible for low- to medium-risk projects, and for assessing and engaging the community around gender justice issues. They did community outreach and had conversations with other DRUM members to help them decide what projects to undertake. Based on the information it gathered and its own internal discussions, the GJC collectively chose projects like:

- developing a comprehensive anti-domestic violence palm card,

- making an audio recording of women talking about their own gender oppression and blasting it in one of the most sexist neighborhoods in New York City,
- performing public plays that demonstrated how community members should challenge gender injustice, and
- conducting public workshops that engaged the community around gender justice issues.

Throughout this process, GJC leaders tried to establish a good internal culture. They focused on social-emotional practices that would foster camaraderie, commitment, and ultimately retention. These included shared down time, games, team-building exercises, and sharing meals together.

Increasing responsibilities

GJC members collectively evaluated the work they did in that first round of projects. They then discussed which particular aspects of the projects resonated most with them and in the community. Based on their discussions, they determined how to move forward. Evaluating their previous work and using that experience to decide collectively what to do next was an important experience and developmental step for committee members. They are now aiming to make more ambitious cultural change in their communities. The South Queens GJC, for example, is working to identify an intervention that can decrease domestic violence in a community where abusive partners routinely kill young women. The Western Queens GJC, on the other hand, is working to actively involve community members in its street theater. The hope is that GJC members, planted on the street, intervene when they see the dramatized gendered violence, then agitate passersby and community members to join them in disrupting the (staged) violence. The committee also is increasingly proactive and doesn't require staff supervision. They do outreach by themselves and secure logistics before meetings. With more ambitious goals and more decision-making power, GJC members are holding increased responsibilities within the program.

Results so far

GJC members are showing up in DRUM spaces differently than members from other parts of the organization, members who have not gone through this protagonist process. When staff are late to a meeting, the Western Queens GJC is able to organize itself and conduct its business. They rehearse, make decisions about process, and do the work with no staff supervision. GJC members also show more joy in organizational spaces. Where many non-GJC members have a passive attitude and seem to be simply tolerating or enduring meetings, GJC members are active in these spaces. They are eager to take up leadership, whether it is asking challenging questions, pushing other members from different parts of the organization to mobilize for an action, or bringing a gender justice lens to the racial justice work DRUM does. DRUM members used to—and, in other parts of the organization, still do—rely on organizers to make decisions about campaigns and projects, but GJC members now debate among themselves, contend with disagreements, and know that they have skills among themselves to carry the work forward. This was important for GJC members participating in discussions about No New Jails, DRUM's campaign against the city's plan to build four new jails. GJC members were a key part of developing an articulation of the need for community involvement in ending domestic violence instead of more policing and an expanded carceral system. They are taking the initiative in building out a culture of collective care, like visiting and providing support to one another, without an organizer mediating or facilitating those relationships.

Since the GJC operates within the organization, it has the ability to define its own timeline and increase its members' involvement and leadership at its own pace. Many of DRUM's policy campaigns do not have that ability because their timelines are set by coalitions in which DRUM is only one voice. In all, DRUM is encouraged by how the particular innovations in the GJC have been demonstrably developing committee members as protagonists in a long-term, multifaceted struggle for liberation.

Youth United for Change

Youth United for Change (YUC) works to build the leadership of working-class black and Latinx young people in the West Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia so they can win concrete changes

that improve their lives. YUC has been organizing high-school students for nearly 25 years to address inequalities they face in the educational system. More recently, YUC has extended beyond high schools and has started a civic engagement project that is run by alumni of its school-based programs. The civic-engagement project focuses on residents of color of all ages in the neighborhood, which has some of the lowest voter turnout in Philadelphia.

The way things were

In the 1990s and 2000s, YUC was known as a powerhouse in the youth organizing field. The organization recruited young people by speaking to their frustrations with their conditions. It then channeled that anger into collective action, often in the form of direct action and protest, in order to win noticeable improvements in student's lives. During this period, YUC won the construction of a new neighborhood school with 21st century amenities, the limiting of zero-tolerance policies, and a new small-schools model which reduced class sizes and provided students with more supports.

However, by the 2010s, several concerning dynamics had emerged within the organization. Staff took a hands-off approach to member development, assuming that by the virtue of being in oppressed social positions, young people had all the tools they needed to lead, without outside assistance. Reinforcing this laissez-faire practice was a belief among staff and members that, because staff were adults, it was inappropriate or oppressive for them to train members through political education or hold basic expectations about how members should operate within the organization.

Under these conditions, YUC became a safe space for young people but also drifted away from its purpose as an organizing vehicle. YUC focused increasingly on providing members with a place to hang out rather than developing their ability to lead and win campaigns. Recruitment primarily targeted young people looking for such a social space. This produced an unexpected challenge when young people who would have engaged in more concrete organizing work, seeing the lack of rigor and discipline in the space, ultimately decided not to join the organization.1 Furthermore, without the

training that could help members develop political clarity and a coherent theory of change, members elevated YUC's direct-action tactics to a place of strategy or principle. They chose direct action and protest in many instances without assessing their usefulness at the particular moment, often making conditions in the organizing work worse and making it harder for YUC to reach its campaign demands. This left YUC isolated, without the trust of potential allies, and less capable of moving the organizing work forward, even losing campaigns as a result.

YUC's protagonist intervention

When these dynamics reached a crisis point in the fall of 2015, YUC decided the best way forward was to completely overhaul the organization. Since then, the leadership has rebuilt from the ground up, using a new and experimental organizing model that has evolved in the course of practice. It began with hiring new staff with no organizing experience. This staff then had to recruit an entirely new membership base, which was to be composed of young people looking to do the concrete political work of YUC.

To make this new model work, YUC needed to lead both the new staff and the new members through developmental processes that would put them in position to act as protagonists at various levels. First, staff needed to learn how to build the organization and implement strategy; only then could they train members to do the same. Simultaneously, YUC began leading its new members through a tiered process that would gradually increase their responsibility and deepen their grasp of YUC's political line. The hope and hypothesis were that, after the first few rounds of this process, a new, self-reproducing, protagonist organizational culture would emerge and take hold within both the staff and the membership.

To accomplish all of this, both staff and members have held different and new roles each year. This has made space both for individuals' ongoing development and for an increasing number of members to step capably into significant organizational responsibility.

Year One and Year Two: 2015-2016 & 2016-2017 school years

In the first year of YUC's restructuring, staff made all decisions and held all the logistical and organizational labor for the school-based chapters. They created opportunities for members to participate in School District events and then gave them space to reflect on that experience and the strategic viability of those actions. The focus for members was on this action-reflection praxis, which was supported by introductory political education in weekly meetings.

After the school year, YUC ran a six-week summer program where these members split time between canvassing and participating in deeper political education. Nearly everyone who participated continued to Year Two, where staff added recruitment and the training of new recruits to members' responsibilities. These 'veteran' members' commitment and leadership in the organization were obvious and compelling to new recruits. Alongside these increased responsibilities, YUC created a new level of participation: the leadership committee (LC). The LC would be a space where staff could engage in deeper political education with select members who had been through the Year One program and demonstrated follow-through, accountability, and a desire to increase their participation.

Year Three: 2017-2018 school year

In year three, the staff was able to empower the LC—now made up of veteran members with a year or two of experience under their belts—to do more of YUC's basic organizational work. LC members learned discrete skills, like doing turnout calls and facilitating meetings. Staff also ramped up the LC's political education, and had LC members apply what they learned by making grounded assessments and actively combating liberalism in their work.

That summer YUC launched its electoral project. Having seen how summer's every-day schedule accelerated participants' development as leaders, the staff decided to experiment with a new leadership structure that would create even more opportunities for growth. Selected LC members from the school year served as the coordinators of the entire electoral project, requiring them to run trainings,

do volunteer turnout, be responsible for quality control, create field plans, and supervise all field work. This was the first time a team of members was primarily responsible for the success of a major area of work and staff played only a role of supervision and guidance. Through praxis, the coordinators began to see themselves as responsible for the organization. This was evident in the initiative that they showed, like buying groceries for the collective to eat, cleaning YUC's kitchen, and even deciding how the organization should rotate reproductive labor. They were also beginning to see themselves as part of a larger movement. One of the coordinators said that they had always felt a sense of dread at the prospect of having to do unfulfilling work when they graduated from high school but now saw that they could do something meaningful. This member still participates as an alumnus and has taken jobs with other local organizing groups as well as participated in an electoral fellowship through Working Families Party.

Year Four: 2018-2019 school year

In Year Four, YUC created the 'Core', a new layer of organizational leadership for members who were ready to take on more responsibility but not necessarily to serve on the LC. The Core took up many responsibilities that had previously been held by the LC, such as one-on-ones, turnout calls, and member retention tasks. With some of its responsibilities reassigned, the LC was also able to take on new challenges. Staff now expected the LC to train and manage the Core. The LC also had more time to develop deeper political capacities that would allow them to take part in higher levels of decision making. As a result, LC meetings developed into a space for members to make proposals on how to improve the organization and for debating the strategic merits of certain campaigns and alliances. Through this practice, LC members strengthened their ability to assess how, if at all, certain actions built organizational capacity or advanced YUC's goals, and to struggle in a collective setting about those assessments.

This structure also freed up the staff, who still managed the LC but could now devote more time to broader organizational and movement work, and to developing their own capacities as leaders and

protagonists. For instance, YUC staff wrote a book about the organization's new methodology, documenting its lessons for others who might find themselves in positions similar to YUC's in 2015. Some staff also crafted trainings to support other organizations, like Power U, as they navigated their own internal shifts and challenges.

When the school year began, YUC created an Alumni Chapter for members who had graduated. This new chapter took over the coordination of the fledgling electoral work. Most Alumni members had been in the LC, so they were ready for increased leadership and more advanced political education. When summer came, YUC hired four members of the Alumni Chapter to coordinate the summer electoral work. These leaders were responsible for carrying out YUC's political line alongside the staff. A new junior coordination team allowed high school members to continue developing their leadership through intensive work alongside the Alumni coordinators. The staff's role was limited to logistical support and training the coordination teams. By the end of the summer, members and the coordination teams were able to run an entire community meeting by themselves—turn out, agenda creation, interpretation, crunching the data, etc.—in support of a community safety campaign that the Alumni Chapter has been considering for this year.

The role of social-emotional support: Opportunities and challenges

YUC has found that the more regular and intensive a person's participation in the organization is, the more significant emotional supports she needs. The organization's attempts to meet those needs can be seen most clearly in how it structures its summer program. During the summers, members work every day to develop new capacities and meet new challenges, so they need more consistent supports than during the school year, when they average four or five hours of YUC work a week.

In the summers, members share reflections after every field day. They get to share what they are struggling with in their practice. And each member gets to hear appreciations from other members and staff, who share their perspectives on her progress. Staff also have one-on-one check-ins to give

members reflections about how they are participating, like showing up dejected to work or regularly deflecting when asked for their opinions. Many of these meetings end with young people opening up about their experiences and emotional states. Members get to process and release these feelings (often by crying) in a safe and supportive environment. Afterwards, these members have always increased their participation and shown up in the space more comfortable and confident in their leadership.

While YUC believes these supports have helped with retention, that effect has not been universal. For example, one member stopped showing up to meetings after he shut down emotionally during a recruitment roleplay. Leaders made space to discuss the feelings coming up for him, and everyone present—members and staff—let him know he wasn't alone in those feelings. But this wasn't enough to keep him in the organization; it was, those closest to him concluded, safer and more comfortable to go back to being just a student with no responsibility than to continue with the emotionally challenging growth and transformation at YUC. He was not unique; YUC staff have seen many young people, pessimistic about their own ability to effect change or overwhelmed by the challenge of new and scary experiences, leave the organization.

Though it has not always succeeded in providing what every student needs, YUC is more convinced than ever that creating emotional and social supports for its members is key to deepening their engagement and transformation into revolutionary protagonists. Thanks to these supports, along with political education and the escalation of member responsibilities over time, YUC's leadership is confident that the reproductive logic it has been seeking is beginning to take hold within the membership.

Power U in Miami

Power U Center for Social Change trains and works to sharpen the leadership of working-class black and brown youth in Miami, Florida. Florida is a hotbed of experiments in privatization and militarization, and public schools and working-class neighborhoods frequently pay the price. Like

many organizations born in the 1990s and attempting to combat the school-to-prison pipeline, Power U has a history of base-building and leadership development around issues related to the criminalization and the gender violence in young people's everyday lives. Power U believes that such work is vital to preparing these populations to transform and govern society.

The way things were

In its early days, Power U fought for changes to the school disciplinary system and to add age-appropriate sexual health instruction to public school curricula. While it won policy changes and earned favorable media coverage, and many of its members developed sharper and more radical political analyses, Power U did not have a mass protagonist character. Many members participated in the organization because they felt affirmed and supported there. They enjoyed it as a welcoming space, but they weren't always interested in doing political work. Members would perform the tasks staff asked of them, but they often struggled with the work of building the organization to the scale necessary to win meaningful change or be an everyday presence in the lives of their peers broadly. They built their confidence and improved as public speakers, and they loved direct actions and protest, but they generally struggled to understand the organization's purpose and strategy. They were comfortable discussing the organization with one another but had difficulty talking to other students or strangers about Power U's campaign work. And although they could articulate campaign demands, it was long-standing paid staff who held most of the campaign work behind the scenes.

Power U's protagonist intervention

Power U recognized that changing this dynamic required the ability to move members through an intentionally tiered process that steadily increased the protagonism required of members over time. This would build members' investment in Power U's political purpose and develop their understanding of what it means to build organization. But the way Power U structured its work made such a process almost impossible. Many of its campaigns lasted for several years, which made

integrating high-school students, whose identity as such is necessarily short-term and transitory, quite challenging.

So in 2018, to foster protagonism among its members, Power U made radical changes to the very definition of membership, to the kinds of campaigns it runs, and to the expectations and culture it creates for its members and even paid staff.

Membership changes

The changes began at the beginning, with the way Power U brings members into the organization. Before, students would join simply by showing up to meetings often, becoming a 'regular'. The responsibilities they took on were often arbitrary, based simply on which meetings they decided to show up to. Today, students must go through a six-week political education and orientation program before joining Power U. Completing this program shows Power U that the student has the commitment and potential to take on high levels of protagonism over the long term.

Campaign changes

Once they join, members work with staff organizers to craft and run a campaign from beginning to end. They start with listening campaigns in their schools and neighborhoods about how shared resources are allocated. They must make predictions about what issues the community cares about, and then check those predictions against reality by knocking on doors and listening to actual people share their thoughts and feelings. Together, the members synthesize what they learn during the listening campaign and identify big issues and themes. They then work with the organizers to understand how these issues connect to municipal budgets—especially the school board's budget. At this point, members organize themselves into issue committees that make plans for, and then carry out, large mobilizations around key local school board budget hearings in the upcoming summer.

By focusing on the 5 billion-dollar budget of the school board, Power U is able to run a series of one-year campaigns with clear start and end times. This works well with high school students, who are

only in school for a short time and whose lives are rigidly structured around a yearly schedule. Power U no longer has to bring new members into campaigns that have been going for five years or more, and that the students may not see the end of. Instead, members not only see every stage of the campaign, but have the opportunity to participate in multiple campaigns if they stay with the organization. And each one ends definitively in victory or defeat; either way, it is a vital experience for their political development. Seeing their work lead to concrete changes, or at least definitive decisions, shifts how members understand social processes and how they, as developing protagonists, can impact them. And for campaigns that end in defeat, proper political education and reflection before, during, and afterward can reveal ways that those social processes must be transformed more fundamentally.

As the budget process completes, Power U cycles back into recruitment mode. Members can now participate in the same activities that initially brought them into the organization. The cyclical nature of this process allows Power U to slowly escalate the involvement and protagonism of those who remain engaged in the organization. While most young people do not enter Power U having developed the various capacities needed to practice protagonism in the organization, this cyclical, developmental, tiered approach to participation allows them to begin building those capacities. Through escalating practice, sustained reflection, and the constant support and encouragement of the staff organizers, members come to understand more and more deeply the logic and purpose of the organization, and their own role as emerging leaders in the movement.

Present Challenges

Part of the challenge for Power U's staff in fostering the protagonism of their young members is that the staff is also underdeveloped as protagonists. The staff must combat some of the common ways that bourgeois hegemony in general and movement nonprofits in particular have conditioned—and continue to condition—them to be passive, alienated, and non-protagonist. Both staff and members often enter the organization expecting that all the necessary structures and programs have already been built, or that these things are static and do not need to change over time. Discovering that organizers

must engage with the work dialectically, constantly thinking about the experimental nature of organizing, can cause paralysis and overwhelm for those who are unfamiliar with this approach. So staff must develop themselves as protagonists at the same time as they are developing the members. The organization is currently one year into implementing this shift, and Power U recognizes that it takes a great deal of commitment and time to change habits. As the process continues, staff know it will take time and a good deal of trial and error to cultivate the level of skill necessary to make this a reality. Power U is working to instill the dedication to the craft this requires, including consistent individual and peer coaching; simply conducting workshops will not be enough. But with practice, commitment, and humility, Power U is confident that its new approach to membership and campaigns will create clusters of member-leaders who can help carry out the long-term project of building protagonism.

The benefits of developing protagonists

Developing people as protagonists is difficult. Setbacks and slow progress can be frustrating. It takes time and dedication. But the benefits are undeniable. Before diving into what we've learned about methodology and approach, we want to lead with a few simple headlines about the overall result of these experiments: developing protagonists is possible, it is necessary, and it is worth it.

Building Protagonists Builds Movement Capacity

Oppressed and exploited communities are in constant crisis. Often, left forces must act as rapid responders. While building protagonists can seem like it exhausts the capacity to do the more immediate work of crisis response, in fact it expands organizations' and movements' capacity to respond strategically and effectively. This is evident in instances like DRUM members starting and leading meetings without organizers present, or members of YUC taking on recruitment and retention work.

Members are able to bring political clarity to all that they do

Protagonism does not just produce increased capacity, it also allows for continuity of political line and purpose. Becoming protagonists requires members to engage both in the act of political education and in praxis (action and reflection), and ultimately to take responsibility for groups of people and specific outcomes. Through this, they gain a deeper understanding of the purpose of movement work as well as a growing capacity to think about the collective good. This clarity is key when they begin to participate in strategy development, make organizational decisions, or otherwise have to think about this work on a larger scale.

Members are able to step into leadership roles

As the saying goes, the work of the organizer is to organize herself out of a job. This does not mean simply that she will 'solve' the problems she is organizing around, but more so that she will help build up a base of people who, over time, can take over her leadership role from her. Members may lead a committee in their second year, and in four years they may step into formal leadership as organizers. By building protagonism, in time, members (and organizers) are able to seed new organizations or play important roles in other movement spaces.

Members see themselves as part of a movement, not just one organization

When members are increasingly engaged in and responsible for collective action, they become more aware of their role in movement beyond the organization. This is crucial for socialists thinking about large-scale, systemic transformation.

An approach to protagonism

If the first and most obvious verdict of our discussions was that 'protagonism is good', we also quickly noticed certain themes and commonalities emerging about *how* our organizations have been trying to develop protagonists. We began to see DRUM, YUC, and Power U as three different experiments in protagonism, testing hypotheses that were more or less explicit or well-formed. The results of these early experiments have yielded a new hypothesis to test—a general approach to developing

revolutionary protagonism. We are excited to bring this clearer and more-developed hypothesis back to our organizations, and invite other leftist organizers across the social movements to exchange notes, debate, and conduct experiments in protagonism that may build on or look very different from our own.

Five elements

Our proposed approach has five elements. They are loosely sequential, but also relate to one another dialectically, not linearly.

Recruit members (and eventually have members recruit others).

The first step in organizing is always recruitment. Depending on an organization's particular conditions, that can mean different things, like recruiting a base of everyday people to move organizational work forward, or recruiting social movement colleagues to a politics of revolutionary protagonism. Each of our organizations changed its approach to recruitment as part of its protagonist intervention. The idea was always to better identify and attract people who were likely to succeed in the organization's particular project (which included developing members as protagonists).

Provide members with political education and praxis that is grounded in responsibility for others.

Political education is crucial for moving people from what Mao calls 'phenomenal' knowledge to 'conceptual' understanding. But this education is only fully effective if it is integrated with people's concrete practical work. Study, practice, and reflection create praxis. It is critical to design a process of praxis that is collective, from participants' practice and responsibilities, to the ongoing process of evaluation of and reflection on mistakes and lessons, to their study of new concepts and frameworks. And it must continue and deepen throughout a member's time in the organization. Study, action, and reflection are required at every stage of involvement for people to grow into, and then beyond, their increasing responsibilities and expectations (see element four).

Develop social-emotional infrastructure to support the retention of members.

Each of our organizations has specific practices designed to support members not just as canvassers or facilitators, but as complete human beings with social and emotional needs. We have found that when members feel that the organization sees and supports their entire selves, they are far more likely to remain in the organization, to engage actively and enthusiastically, and ultimately to develop as protagonists.

Increase members' organizational responsibilities over time so that they develop hard organizing skills and capacities that build on one another.

Organizers (including us) often vacillate between treating members as objects—token faces to be shoved in front of a camera or mobilized like pawns on a chessboard—and treating them as if they should (and do) have all the skills they need to lead a movement. Neither of these approaches allows members to grow and transform into the protagonists they need to be to help win and build socialism. Each of our organizations has worked to put its members on a path of increasing responsibility and expectations. This acknowledges their actual limitations, but also treats them as protagonist subjects that can grow beyond these limitations. This allows them to develop and transform as radicals and revolutionaries.

Give members responsibility for shaping a component of the organization's program or campaign and for making (some) organizational decisions.

For members to develop as active protagonists capable of transforming and governing society, they need experience making meaningful decisions and having real responsibility. They need to practice thinking not just from their own perspectives, but from an organizational and even movement-wide perspective. As members develop and gain increased responsibilities and capacities, they need the opportunity to help shape programs and campaigns.

Methodology: How to carry out this approach

The five elements are the core of our proposed approach, but by themselves they say more about what to do than how to do it. We have also developed some core methodological principles around which to build any such experiment in protagonism.

A dialectical structure

We think it is important to make the 'developing protagonism' work *structurally* distinct from what we'll call an organization's 'community impact' work, whether that's activist rapid response, base-building policy campaigns, radical direct service, or something else. These two sets of work are different enough from one another that they each need attention, focus, and dedicated resources. They are intertwined enough, though, that they must exist in dialectical relationship with each other. A member will participate in both 'wings' of an organization: engaging in time-delimited campaigns while also engaging in the praxis of protagonism.

Sustained time together

This process works best when a cohort of members works together regularly and for an extended period of time. This builds members' understanding of collective responsibility and allows them to learn together and from one another. It also helps them learn how to build and maintain an organization that sustains itself over time. It can increase their commitment and capacity to engage in longer-term campaigns that aren't directed at immediate gratification. And giving members extended time together helps each of them grow and become a protagonist on her own timeline.

Committed and protagonistic leadership

To develop members' protagonism well, organizations also need a critical mass of strong staff members or lead organizers. They should have a strong grasp of organizing and base-building. And a subset of the organization must share a commitment to revolutionary protagonism. Without that commitment, organizations will struggle to meet the many real and difficult challenges to developing people as protagonists.

For instance, the real urgency in oppressed and exploited communities to respond to immediate needs and crises can push organizations to prioritize short-term campaign gains at the expense of members' long-term development as protagonists—to take shortcuts that stunt members' political growth. It is a dialectical dynamic that organizers must continuously negotiate. The only way to successfully do so is with a strong commitment to building protagonists. That commitment begins with the leadership.

Additionally, a critical mass of leadership must embody protagonism. This is especially needed amongst leaders working most directly with developing members. Without such protagonism from leadership, it will be hard to advance programs that respond to the particular developmental needs of the organization and its membership. This will ultimately curtail how much members can develop as protagonists.

Organizational particularity

Finally, our three organizations have not all taken the exact same path, nor have we all arrived at the same location. Each of our organizations had its own reasons for prioritizing developing protagonists, and its own assessment about how it was set up (or not) to do that. Each had to use its assessment to engage in a unique struggle to create organizational conditions that fostered protagonism. Other organizations that seek to develop their members as protagonists will have to do the same, overcoming any number of challenges particular to their conditions. That could mean building alignment amongst their peers in leadership on the necessity to make a 'protagonist intervention', or doing the same with funders, or recruiting a whole new membership base, or transforming internal organizational practices. If the intervention is not tailored to an organization's particular context, it will certainly fail.

Conclusion

Our collective experiences and experiments in base-building have convinced us that socialists must build and retain a mass base to achieve real social transformation. We believe that this base must be

protagonist—active, creative, able to lead and to follow—or it will not be able to grow into the new challenges the movement will face as it advances toward socialism.

We believe we have arrived at some methodological principles for developing protagonists that must now be tested in further practice. These include:

- Recruit members (and have members recruit others).
- Provide members with political education and praxis that is grounded is responsibility for others.
- Develop social-emotional infrastructure to support the retention of members.
- Increase members' organizational responsibilities over time so that they develop hard organizing skills and capacities that build on one another.
- Give members responsibility for shaping a component of the organization's program or campaign and for making (some) organizational decisions.

To put this approach into practice, organizations must be agile enough to respond to political and material realities while maintaining a core of the organization that is committed to the development of revolutionary protagonists. This is a question of structure, program, and political principle.

We know that this is only a sketch. We know we have a long way to go to get to a robust, consistent, and proven approach to developing protagonists that can be replicated in different contexts and grown to scale. But we were encouraged by the common ground we found in our different organizational experiences, and look forward to seeing how our conclusions hold up to new rounds of testing in practice.

Ideas for the Struggle #2: Convince not Impose

- Marta Harnecker (2010)

1. Popular movements and, more generally, the different social protagonists who today are engaged in the struggle against neoliberal globalization both at the international and national levels reject, with good reason, attitudes that aim to impose hegemony or control over movements. They don't accept the steamroller policy that some political and social organizations tended to use that, taking advantage of their position of strength and monopolizing political positions, attempt to manipulate the movement. They don't accept the authoritarian imposition of a leadership from above; they don't accept attempts made to lead movements by simply giving orders, no matter how correct they are.

2. Such attitudes, instead of bringing forces together, have the opposite effect. On the one hand, it creates discontent in the other organizations; they feel manipulated and obligated to accept decisions in which they've had no participation; and on the other hand, it reduces the number of potential allies, given that an organization that assumes such positions is incapable of representing the real interests of all sectors of the population and often provokes mistrust and skepticism among them.

3. But to fight against positions that seek to impose hegemony does not mean renouncing the fight to win hegemony, which is nothing else but attempting to win over, to persuade others of the correctness of our criteria and the validity of our proposals.

4. To win hegemony doesn't require having many people in the beginning, a few is enough. The hegemony reached by Movimiento 26 de Julio (July 26 Movement) led by Fidel Castro in Cuba, seems to us to be a sufficiently convincing example of this.

5. More important than creating a powerful party with a large number of militants is to raise a political project that reflects the population's most deeply felt aspirations, and thus win their minds and hearts. What is important is that its politics succeed in procuring the support of the masses and consensus in the majority of society.

6. Some parties boast about the large numbers of militants they have, but, in fact, they only lead their members. The key is not whether the party is large or small; what matters is that the people feel they identify with its proposals.

7. Instead of imposing and manipulating, what is necessary is convincing and uniting all those who feel attracted to the project to be implemented. And you can only unite people if the others are respected, if you are willing to share responsibilities with other forces.

8. Today, important sectors of the left have come to understand that their hegemony will be greater when they succeed in bringing more people behind their proposals, even if they may not do so under their banner. We have to abandon the old-fashioned and mistaken practice of demanding intellectual property rights over organizations that dare to hoist their own banner.

9. If an important number of grassroots leaders are won over to these ideas, then it is assured that these ideas will more effectively reach the different popular movements. It is also important to win over distinguished national

personalities to the project, because they are public opinion makers and will be effective for promoting the proposals and winning over new supporters.

10. We believe that a good way to measure hegemony obtained by an organization is to examine the number of natural leaders and personalities that have taken up its ideas and, in general, the number of people who identify with them.

11. The level of hegemony obtained by a political organization cannot be measured by the number of political positions that have been won. What is fundamental is that those who occupy leading positions in diverse movements and organizations take up as their own and implement the proposals elaborated by the organization, despite not belonging to it.

12. A test for any political organization that declares itself as not wanting to impose hegemony or control is still being capable of proposing the best people for different positions, whether they are members of that very party, are independent or are members of other parties. The credibility among the people of a project will depend a great deal on the figures that the left raises.

13. Of course this is easier said than done. Frequently, when an organization is strong, it tends to underestimate the contribution that other organizations may have to offer and tend to impose its ideas. It is easier to do this than to take the risk of rising to the challenge to winning people over. While more political positions are obtained, the more careful we have to be of not falling into the desire to impose hegemony or control.

14. Moreover, the concept of hegemony is a dynamic one, since hegemony is not established once and for all. To maintain it requires a process of permanently rewinning it. Life follows its course, new problems arise, and with them new challenges.

Protagonism and Productivity

- Michael Lebowitz (2017)

When I went to work in Venezuela in 2004, I discovered in the Bolivarian Constitution some elements that I consider to be central to the concept of socialism for the twenty-first century. For one, there was the emphasis upon human development—the goal of "ensuring overall human development." But there was more. That Constitution also focused upon the question of how people develop their capacities and capabilities—i.e., how human development occurs. It declared that participation by people in "forming, carrying out and controlling the management of public affairs is the necessary way of achieving the involvement to ensure their complete development, both individual and collective." The necessary way. Accordingly, the Bolivarian Constitution calls for democratic planning and participatory budgeting at all levels of society and upon "self-management, co-management, cooperatives in all forms."1

And these were more than noble words in a constitution that are soon forgotten. President Chávez constantly stressed the importance of practice. "Socialists have to be made," he explained on Aló Presidente in 2007. "A revolution has to produce not only food, goods and services it also has to produce, more importantly than all of those things, new human beings: new men, new women." Agreeing with Che's point about the necessity of simultaneously developing productive forces and socialist human beings, Chávez insisted that the only road was practice: "We have to practice socialism, that's one way of saying it, have to go about building it in practice. And this practice will create us, ourselves, it will change us; if not we won't make it."2

Precisely because he understood the importance of this link between practice and human development, Chávez stressed the development of the communal councils where people transformed both circumstances and themselves, calling those councils the cells of a new socialist state. And, it is why, in his last reflection (when already seriously ill), Chávez stressed the absolute necessity of building the communes (comuna o nada) and argued that capitalist workplaces with their built-in hierarchical social division of labor should be replaced by one that involves the full participation of the associated producers and an appropriate means of coordination. For Chávez, the necessary road was protagonistic democracy—in the workplace and in the community—as the practice that transforms people.

All this should be familiar to anyone who has studied Marx. This key link between human development and practice is precisely Marx's concept of revolutionary praxis as "the simultaneous changing of circumstances and human activity or self change." Once we grasp Marx's key link, we understand that every human activity has two products—both the change in circumstances and the change in self, both the change in the object of labor and the change in the laborer. In short, in

addition to the material product of activity, there always is a second product—the human product. Unfortunately, that second product is often forgotten. And, the question we should ask is: what are the implications of forgetting that second product?

If we begin from the recognition that every activity in which people engage forms them, then we understand that there is a relation between the nature of our acts and the capacity we develop. If, for example, workers democratically decide upon a plan, work together to achieve its realization, solve problems which emerge and shift from activity to activity, there is a constant succession of acts which expand their capacities. Those workers are, indeed, the products of their own activity. "Every developed personality," proposed the French Marxist psychologist Lucien Sève, "appears to us straight away as an enormous accumulation of the most varied acts through time."3

Thus, the level of capacity is a function of the nature and extent of practice. This is one aspect of Marx's key link of human development and practice. But there is another side. What do we mean by capacity? Simply, capacity is the ability to engage in many acts. Sève defines capacities as "the ensemble of actual potentialities, innate or acquired, to carry out any act whatever and whatever its level."4 The higher the extent of capacity, then, the greater the potential flow of acts drawing upon that capacity. In short, capacity is a stock, a stock which is expanded as a result of particular acts, and which is the basis for a flow of acts. Thus, we need to explore the complex dialectical relationship between acts and capacities (which, is to say, between practice and human development).

For example, a high capacity, i.e., a great potential for action, does not mean that all of that capacity is necessarily utilized. There is the potential of unutilized capacity. And if particular capacities are unutilized, they tend to atrophy—even if they have been built up in the past. For example, education leading to the development of particular skills will lose effectiveness over time and, indeed, will be forgotten if unutilized. Similarly, a process of learning by doing builds capacity, but if those capacities subsequently are not used, they wither away. In this respect, just as Marx spoke metaphorically of the renewal of the worker in his free time as "the production of fixed capital, this fixed capital being man himself," one might speak of a tendency for moral depreciation of human capacity that has been built up, all other things equal, if it is not used.5

By this logic, the maintenance of a stock of particular capacities requires renewal by its use. The education received before its utilization, the skills that are the result of a process of learning by doing—these previous additions to capacity are renewed through their use. This is a case of simple reproduction of capacity. Contracted reproduction of capacity, in contrast, occurs through non-utilization of that capacity. Thus, practice is key in determining the level of capacity.

In the same way, we can think about expanded reproduction of capacity. That growth of capacity occurs as a result of new acts. For example, engaging in new types of activity, solving new problems, activities that break with routine—these are practices that expand the stock of capacity. This allows us, then, to distinguish analytically between the set of activities that expand capacities (Type I) and the set of activities that simply utilize existing capacities (Type II). The second permits the simple reproduction of those capacities and thus, in itself, does not imply further growth. Type I activities, in contrast, may be seen as an investment that expands capacity and, all other things equal, permits an increase in future activities. Finally, it is obvious that the non-utilization of existing capacity and, even more, the destruction of existing capacities means, all other things equal, a reduction in the potential to carry out activities in the future.6

This discussion, however, relates to only one side of the process. In addition to the production of human beings in the process of production, there is also the production of things. Recall that in the process of production, indeed in any human activity, there is the change in both circumstances and self-change, both the change in the object of labor and the change in the laborer. Thus, we need to consider the interaction between the output of these two products— i.e., the interaction of the joint products. Let us consider some propositions:

Type I activities (i.e., capacity building activity) in the production of human beings will be reflected, all other things equal, in future productivity increases in the production of things. In other words, increases in material productivity can be seen, all other things equal, as a function of the growth of the capacities of workers.

Type II activities (i.e., capacity-using activity) in the production of human beings leads to the renewal of capacity and thus has no effect on productivity in the production of things, all other things equal.

Finally, in contrast to both Type I and Type II activities, if the capacity of producers falls (either because it is unutilized or because it is destroyed), then productivity in the production of things will fall, all other things equal.

All of this is invisible if you use capitalist accounting and rely upon capitalist concepts of efficiency. Consistent with the logic of capital, capitalist accounting is concerned with workers only insofar as they are costs for capital. From the perspective of capital, workers are merely means for its growth. Accordingly, capitalist accounting ignores workers and focuses upon material output, the value of output and profits. Only the quantity of things and the value of things enter into its discussions of output and efficiency.

In contrast, the logic of the working class is centered around what Marx called in Capital "the worker's own need for development." Thus, the focus of socialist accounting and the concept of socialist efficiency is upon all conditions that allow for the full development of the worker's capacity. There are here two different concepts of rationality, and they are not neutral, but rather class concepts, and they yield different conclusions. For example, time spent building workers' capacities (through learning skills on the job like accounting or engaging in collective discussions to solve production problems) appears for capital (and thus capitalist accounting) as inefficiency and reduced productivity. In contrast, from the perspective of the worker and a society oriented to "the worker's own need for development," these are investments.

Is it possible to find a way to measure and thereby compare these contrasting products of capitalist production? Our first concern here must be the necessity to recognize that of the two joint products of capitalist production, only one is acknowledged in traditional capitalist accounting, and we need to understand the implications of this silence. We need to understand that capitalist accounting is a class concept; its class bias is revealed by what it considers important to measure and by what it excludes.

In contrast, the logic of the working class (and thus the socialist accounting implicit in it) is not so one-sided. Workers have an interest in productivity increases insofar as they contribute to the satisfaction of their own need for development. The time released from the direct production process, Marx noted, is "time for the full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back upon the productive power of labor as itself the greatest productive power."7 That growth in productivity in its turn creates the basis for more free time.

Thus, socialist accounting necessarily considers the change in both products—the change in circumstances and the change in human capacities, the joint products of productive activity. So, I return to the question I posed earlier: what happens if we forget about the second product? What happens if we ignore the principle for socialism for the twenty-first century that protagonism is the necessary condition for complete development, both individual and collective?

As I have argued elsewhere, to build the new socialist society, it is necessary to develop new, socialist concepts.8 So, let me end by paraphrasing Che from his Man and Socialism in Cuba: the pipe dream that socialism can be achieved through capitalist accounting and capitalist concepts of efficiency can lead into a blind alley. And you wind up there after having traveled a long distance with many crossroads, and it is hard to figure out just where you took the wrong turn.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about the general idea of Protagonism as a process for organizations to undertake for member development?
2. Are there any situations you think that using this method could have helped or strengthened your organizing? Or any situations that you felt closely aligned with this model?
3. Are there any points from Ideas for struggle that you want to discuss or explore more deeply?
4. What do you think about Lebowitz's examples of human development and practice?
5. Could we use Protagonism to help our organizing within DSA and the broader US Left, if so how? If not why not?