

Growth & Diversity Working Group: Readings

Here are some selections from a set of readings we'll use to guide our discussions. Below are links to additional readings for those interested and internal chapter strategy documents and position papers.

DSA New Orleans– Strategy Documents and Position Papers

[Labor Roots](#), Morgan Dowdy

Labor Roots is a position paper in which Morgan outlines what a “labor branch” oriented structure could look like within New Orleans DSA and how to get there.

[Growth & Diversity Strategy Document](#), New Orleans DSA

As part of our chapter program in 2019, New Orleans DSA identified growing and diversifying the chapter as a priority. The working group drafting the priority resolution for the local convention created this strategy document to outline what a process for doing this might look like.

Readings

From: [No Shortcuts](#) (p. 182-183), Jane McAlevey

In No Shortcuts, Jane McAlevey outlines how organizations, mostly unions, have built diverse coalitions to win in tough fights and in hostile terrain, by organizing not just workplaces, but whole communities. Chapter 6 covers Make the Road New York (MRNY), 15,000 person strong nonunion membership organization of immigrants in New York City.

Make the Road New York (MRNY) has adopted a highly collaborative organizational model that reflects exactly the kind of strategic capacity Marshall Ganz described at the United Farm Workers, with ‘leaders who take part in regular, open, and authoritative deliberation and are motivated by commitment to choices they participated in making and on which they have the autonomy to act.’

MRNY also has a highly deliberative and participatory organizational style—referred to internally as a ‘high-touch’ process. This is similar to Francesca Polletta’s analysis of participatory democracy and prefigurative politics. Polletta and MRNY emphasize the importance of *process* in strengthening internal solidarity and enhancing the political impact of social movements. Efforts to win and enforce progressive change, whether through the courts, the ballot box, negotiated union contracts, or

legislative bodies, can only succeed in the long term if large numbers of ordinary people are participating at levels high enough to enable them to hold institutions accountable.

Part of the organization's capacity stems from its multi-issue character. MRNY's size has enabled it to operate effectively on a range of issues, including but not limited to workplace justice. As Deborah Axt and MRNY founder Andrew Friedman have noted, 'Make the Road differed from many worker centers in the breadth of issues it addressed that were not directly related to worker or workplace organizing, and in its wider use of in-house legal, education, and other services.' A broad issue spread coupled with open and democratic organization structures helps increase motivation among MRNY leaders and members alike, because different individuals will feel passionately about different issues.

From: [Towards a Socialist Party](#), Arielle Sallai

Arielle is a DSA Member and organizer in Los Angeles, CA

To be an effective organization, our committees should be working together toward a shared vision for a better Los Angeles, not competing against each other for members and resources. We should aim to be more strategic, but also deeply participatory—a top-down structure is not the answer. The committee system also has a tendency to create activists, not organizers. Ice breakers at chapter-run events are often: 'What committee are you in?'—essentially, 'What is your passion project?'; but our passion project should be socialism. Organizing around housing justice or labour are just tactics, or pressure points, to build working-class power to get us there. But also, crucially, this internal structure is inaccessible for most working-class people, and results in recruiting more and more of the same types of members: people who found us online, who are passionate about a particular issue and available to attend endless planning meetings, far from where they live or work. Those members are more likely to be downwardly-mobile millennials from middle-class backgrounds, white and male.

To change this, we need a real membership-building strategy, and we need to meet people where they're at. We have to organize at the neighbourhood level, and actually ask people to join us. If we hope to have millions of members, we can't rely on passive-recruitment strategies, and people can't just be funnelled into issue-based committees. Not that we should eliminate issue-based committees entirely, but we should recognize them as places in which to deliberate and refine our policy positions, not as the predominant site of dsa work. At the same time, we

should be careful not to make a false dichotomy, whereby the neighbourhood is the place where decisions are carried out, and not where they are made. The neighbourhood should be another place where we are articulating our demands.

At dsa-Los Angeles we're moving closer to this kind of model. At our last annual convention, we passed a resolution to build branches—and now we have three: Central LA, the Westside and the San Fernando Valley. Our general meetings are now held simultaneously across these branches, so members don't have to drive across town to attend them. We've appointed branch leadership, and they're beginning to discuss how our committees can localize their work. For example, the Westside branch recently connected with the Westside local of the la Tenants Union, via our housing and homelessness committee, to support direct action against a landlord who's trying to evict a long-term tenant in Venice. We also hold neighbourhood hangouts: social, low-key recruitment events in neighbourhoods across the county, including places like Santa Clarita, Palmdale, South LA and Pasadena that are outside our larger membership cores. With Proposition 10 to expand rent control in California last year, we held concurrent canvasses across the county, mirroring the locations where we hold hangouts and have a high concentration of members. It was a lot more work than hosting just one or two big canvasses every other week, but we built more capacity that way, making it easier for members to get involved and organize with their neighbours.

From: [Communist Party USA \(CPUSA\) Handbook](#):

CPUSA was an influential political group during the 1st half of the 20th century. Membership swelled and shrunk dramatically throughout this period, but at times had as many as 50,000 members.

The stronghold, the fortress of the revolutionary movement, is in the factory. But in order to build the revolutionary movement there, we must organize all Party members working in one factory into a Shop Unit. The main difference between the Communist Party and the Socialist Party form of organization is that the Socialist Party organizations (branches) are built on the basis of bourgeois election wards and districts while the Communist Party is built on the basis of the place of employment. Party members who work in the same shop cannot belong to different Street Units. If such forms of organization were permitted, Party members working in the same factory and not knowing each other, would carry on their Party work in an anarchistic way. Each one individually would try to give leadership to the other workers.

The first step, therefore, in building the Unit in a factory is to find who the Party members are. This can be done by checking the membership registration or by getting information from the fraction of the union. If we find three or more members, a Shop Unit should immediately be organized.

Since the most effective work of the Party is inside the factory, it is necessary to find ways and means whereby developed Party members can get a job in a given factory, and in this way to start building the Party there.

The Street and Town Units have many members who are working in big factories. These single members should know that their main task is to build the Party inside the factory. But it is not sufficient to assign this basic task to these members. Their Street Units must help them politically and organizationally (forces from outside, shop papers, Daily Worker distribution from outside, finances, etc.). There are many good examples in our Party which prove that with proper help, one member in a big factory can recruit two, three or more members for the Party in two or three weeks, and organize a Shop Unit.

There are thousands of very close sympathizers, readers of our press (Daily Worker or the language papers), members of the unions and various fraternal and cultural organizations, who are working in important factories. Conscientious effort will help us to recruit them into the Party and thus build Shop Units.

From: [Hammer & Hoe](#), Robin D.G. Kelley

Hammer & Hoe documents the history of the CPUSA in Birmingham, Alabama and the rural south.

In 1930, a columnist for the Daily Worker predicted that the Communist Party in the South would be composed of young whites "who are not so weighed down by the prejudices of their parents." But historical reality, as we have seen thus far, had little in common with this writer's vision of rebellious white youth leading the hitherto sleeping black masses in the march to self-determination. These uninitiated men and women were not intellectuals sympathetic to left-wing movements, nor were they frustrated labor organizers weary of the pace of change. With the possible exception of Montgomery Party leader John Beans, Alabama's black cadre of unskilled and semiskilled industrial workers, sharecroppers, domestics, and housewives had rural roots and no previous experience with radical movements. Accustomed to recruiting working people knowledgeable and sympathetic to left-wing causes, district organizer Tom Johnson noted with surprise

that Alabama's black cadre were "not old sympathizers of the party who have been on the fringe of the movement for some time and have absorbed some of our theory and philosophy." Ironically, what had presumably frustrated Johnson and other leading Communists ensured the Party's growth and survival in Alabama.

Because the movement was built from scratch by people without a EuroAmerican left-wing tradition, Alabama's black cadre interpreted Communism through the lenses of their own cultural world and the international movement of which they were now a part. Far from being a slumbering mass waiting for Communist direction, black working people entered the movement with a rich culture of opposition that sometimes contradicted, sometimes reinforced the Left's vision of class struggle. The Party offered more than a vehicle for social contestation; it offered a framework for understanding the roots of poverty and racism, linked local struggles to world politics, challenged not only the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy but the petit bourgeois racial politics of the black middle class, and created an atmosphere in which ordinary people could analyze, discuss, and criticize the society in which they lived.[...]

The Party's version of Marxist education taught poor blacks to connect their own lives to struggles throughout the world, and the Party's economic theories provided explanations for a number of phenomena, including the roots of poverty, wealth, and racism. But blacks also found within these study groups a source of pride, for after all, many were now receiving what white society had too often denied them—an education. John Gamer, a semiliterate coal miner who gave up sharecropping in Bullock County for the Birmingham mines, recalled that one of the main reasons for joining the Party and remaining a Communist for so long was the education it gave him. (His membership lasted over half a century.) Black Communists fortunate enough to study at the "Workers School" in New York, or in some cases at the Lenin School in Moscow, found the experience tantamount to obtaining a diploma of sorts and returned to Alabama proudly exhibiting their newly acquired knowledge. In 1934, Hosea Hudson—who was illiterate at the time—along with two other Communists "rode the rails" to New York in the dead of winter to attend a ten-week course at the Workers School. Hudson returned a changed man: "I felt like I'm somebody. . . . I'm talking about political economy, about the society itself, how it automatically would breed war and fascism. I'm discussing about the danger of imperialist war." Seeing himself as a learned individual deserving of the respect "better class Negroes" received, Hudson often shared his knowledge with non-Party people, using as his forum the customary social habitat of black males: "I'd be discussing socialism in the barber shop. . . .

We'd start the conversation off, then we'd talk about socialism, and how the workers conditions would be improved under socialism. . . . They'd sit down there and wouldn't no one ask no questions, wouldn't interrupt what I'm saying. They wanted to see what I had to tell."

From: [Why Recruit?](#), Nat Steele

This piece outlines why intentional recruiting is needed to diversify DSA. Nat is a DSA member and organizer in Washington DC and The Organizer is the publication of Collective Power Network.

We cannot stop at mere recruitment; we have to go further and develop leadership. This means we don't privilege people who can attend the most meetings, subscribe to the most social media feeds, or opine with the most ideas. "Sink or swim" is not how socialists develop leadership. Instead, we have to reach out, support, and make the space for the leaders that already exist among the diverse communities we recruit from. We must both build their investment in our organization and encourage them to step up to levels in leadership as DSA members, thus growing as socialists.[...]

Recruitment of marginalized groups is hardly a given, nor in a reactionary political climate does it happen without intentionality. The system of wage labor, modulated as it is by axes of oppression, lays the groundwork for working people to understand the salience of a socialist analysis of their lives. However, this analysis doesn't just automatically develop once a worker has been oppressed enough. A socialist vision of the world is one we have to actively expound.[...]

And when everyday people are moved on those issues, let's ask them to organize with us, as socialists, as part of our organization. Let's ask them what the demands should be. Let's ask them to lead. Let's put emphasis on those things as a national organization.