

# Unite the class!

by Jean Allen

## Introduction

*“No class in capitalist society is internally uniform and even. That is true even for the capitalist class, it's more true for the working class. The working class is always uneven in correspondence to the unevenness of capitalist development.”--Gabe Winant, Fragile Juggernaut*

On the banks of the Genesee river, the University of Rochester is on strike. [Workers at the University of Rochester earn only \\$15k/year as a stipend. After years of organizing, the University of Rochester met with them at the bargaining table and seemed to support their effort.](#) Since Trump's election, the administration has withdrawn from the process and “intends to block students from organizing”. For that reason, U of R graduate workers, who have patiently and capably organized for years, have been pushed to a strike. This is the largest labor struggle the city has seen for decades and, if the graduate workers win, it would have been the largest increase in unionized labor in the city in a generation. Their picket lines are immaculately organized, buzzing with the disciplined and earnest energy that can only come from those newly brought into a movement. But they are also buttressed by a decade of radical organizing in this city. On the picket line you can talk with city council people, members of various local subcultures from urban farmers to clowns to radicals from any number of organizations, all while you eat grilled chicken and veggie dogs. Radical labor organizers help the grad workers coordinate their pickets such that deliveries can't get in, food is brought in by labor locals and Food Not Bombs alike, the music is a zany mix between pop and 19th century labor folk. This picket is contemporary US radicalism at its finest, with one exception: throughout the picket, there is not a keffiyeh, no Palestine pin, not a single flag. This is at the request of the union.

Why is that? It is not because the Graduate Labor Union (GLU) is Zionist or even apolitical. The University of Rochester was the main site of Rochester's encampments last year, and the labor unionists are as radical as any new wave of laborists would be. It was not at the insistence of the broader labor or activist community, who have been out there picketing with them. It was not because of some sense of weakness in Palestinian solidarity organizing, which has moved from victory to victory in Rochester and again is supportive of the strike. It's because the University of Rochester is helping the state deport any problematic foreign students involved with Palestinian solidarity. Half of the Graduate Labor Union are foreign students and eleven organizers have already had their student visas revoked (of which 6 had their visas restored, and 5 are ultimately leaving). Put in other words: it is too dangerous for GLU to allow any visible connection between themselves and the Palestinian solidarity movement.

That is, in miniature, the thesis of this essay. There is no trick which sidesteps this repression, and here the division of workers has nothing to do with people's subjective opinions. We can hope for wildcat actions, illicit moments of solidarity, illegalist developments. But so long as the University and state hold the threat of immediate deportation over the heads of foreign students, there is a division in the workers movement which you need to publicly accept to act. The state has imposed a division on the workers and until we remove that division we must act around it, accepting a wall, however temporary, between one of the most important labor struggles the city has had in a generation and the Palestinian solidarity movement.

How are we, as socialists, to organize the workers movement? Not just the constellations of remaining unions, the whole thing? There are many theories, from [base building](#) to the [rank and file strategy](#) to [policy feedback](#). Here I will pose a new thesis. Socialists often think of the working class as *subjectively* divided—by our lack of organization, by political alignment, by *narratives* around race. While that is certainly true, there is a mistaken belief that there is some *objectively* unified working class out there waiting to be chiseled from our current conditions. This argument tends to view the divisions workers face as merely cosmetic ideological impositions from above. But the frustrating reality is that the working class is both subjectively *and* objectively divided. There are processes, rules, regulations that the state uses to wedge the working class. The result of this is we find less a unified class that just needs to be organized, and more a series of class fragments created by state policy.

To discuss this question, I'll discuss one of the best theories of how socialists are to relate to the working class currently available on the US left: Communist Caucus' *Proletarian Disorganization*. I will lay out their argument and what I view as the faults in it, before discussing a theory of class division--the everpresent ways the state prevents the working class from organizing. I will then look at the real workers movement in the US today and its faults, before concluding with an argument for my resolution *Democracy For All* as a part of the path forward.

## Disorganization

[Our Moment: Proletarian Disorganization as the Problem of Our Time](#), also called *Proletarian Disorganization*, is one of the main theoretical texts of Communist Caucus. Its authors argue that the current moment is defined by the slow destruction of working class organizations, and their replacement with alienation and individuation. This is absolutely a real dynamic: labor density in the United States has cracked [single digits](#) overall recently, with an increasingly large portion of the labor movement bound up in the public sector which Trump is currently in the process of destroying. Without broad unionization, most workers do not experience anything approaching democracy and instead turn to ever deeper alienation. This dynamic has become the defining trait of the moment, leading to political movements which try to find a way forward through shortcuts, like spontaneous street energy or celebrity worship. None of that has worked so far, since socialism requires organized workers institutions and we currently have none.

The authors then argue that socialists must break this impasse by directly organizing workers and indeed that this is the main task of the current moment. Disorganization constrains any attempt at radical politics, from social democracy to insurrectionary anarchism, because it means *any* political vision is necessarily unmoored from the broader class. This can only be resolved, our comrades say, through the persistent development of [“mass proletarian institutions that can be used by their rank and file as vehicles for the class struggle.”](#)

Connected to this is a criticism of the focus socialists put on issues other than how we organize a mass base. Against the tendency to view the main problems of the socialist movement as involving the Democratic ballot line or declarations of the party, they argue that we should focus all our energy on the resolution of this disorganization. Doing so would require reversing the fate of our labor movement, and would require the promises of the tenant movement [to pay off](#). That will require, Communist Caucus argues, a tremendous amount of innovation on our part alongside a massive increase in our efforts to these projects, to the degree that their comrades’ focus on issues *other than* how to solve the organizing problem of our time seems dilatory. A direct quote:

*Successful proletarian reorganization will reconstruct the foundations of class struggle and bring about new strategic possibilities. In other words, desirable opportunities that currently appear impossible can become unlocked, and they can even combine to drive each other forward. Consider, for example, how the age-old question of reform and revolution appears today. Ironically, proletarian disorganization currently blocks both transformative reforms and revolutionary change. No amount of sectarianism between the two can overcome this barrier, as the option for either is simply not on the table in our present. As with the electoral-first push, even when reform politics gain momentum, they immediately become vulnerable to systemic pressures that force significant compromise regardless of conviction. Revolutionary politics are likewise pigeonholed, as calls for revolutionary action become quickly consigned to micro-sect marginality or islanded prefiguration.*

This is a grounded argument which speaks to a real problem with our moment. It’s unquestionable that a central part of the task of the contemporary socialist is answering the question of how to organize the vast majority of workers who now work in retail and logistics, operating under intentionally fragmented labor markets, into unions. We need a vast worker’s counterculture, mass participation in democratic neighborhood organizations, a collective experience of democracy, if we want a working class fit to rule society.

There are two criticisms I have of Communist Caucus’ argument, stemming from two elements which I believe they under-emphasize. On a political level there is a suspicion of high political questions marked by several carve outs. On the one hand revolutionary politics are often referred to in a way similar to this:

*“As with the electoral-first push, even when reform politics gain momentum, they immediately become vulnerable to systemic pressures that force significant compromise*

*regardless of conviction. Revolutionary politics are likewise pigeonholed, as calls for revolutionary action become quickly consigned to micro-sect marginality or islanded prefiguration. This is a difficult reality to confront. But we will face the truth now, or we never will."*

It is objectively true that contemporary US society is not suitable for worker rule. That said, this framing presents revolutionary politics as simply the other side of a spectrum of socialists who are uninterested in the actual problem of disorganization. Despite this framing, abolitionism is framed as a potential way forward for the worker's movement in *Proletarian Disorganization*. In practice Communist Caucus members are tremendously supportive of abolitionist politics and have played an outsized role in DSA's Palestinian Solidarity organizing, all while suggesting we keep our heads to the grindstone. This is a contradiction which I will try to resolve.

Structurally, Communist Caucus also has shown a disinterest in party-building, either treating the issue as synonymous with the ballot line question (which I cannot hold against them, it is a common conflation) or as a model under a particular challenge. Their conclusion seems to be that a system of mass organizations will need to culminate before we reach a 'fundamentally different social structure' which will provide unique opportunities for the socialist left:

*"If our primary task today is to build proletarian organization, what should that look like practically? We need mass proletarian institutions that can be used by their rank and file as vehicles for the class struggle. Still, we cannot simply reconstruct organizations as they existed earlier in history. Mass proletarian organization always coalesces around contradictions (like that between worker and boss) as they influence the everyday experience of the working class and as they relate to the larger historical situation of their time. It will not be possible to build proletarian organizations just as they existed before because both working-class experiences and the historical situation have changed."*

This accumulation of workers organizations seems to be their view of how we will get to the party. Against this I will argue that a party structure is needed *before* we can make the transformative interventions the worker's movement needs.

## Division

*"Who has the right to have rights?."*-Mahmoud Khalil, [Letter from a Palestinian Political Prisoner in Louisiana](#)

There is an objective working class: everyone whose survival depends on the sale of their labor has, at a high enough level, the same interests. But when we wake up we do not wake up as an “objective worker.” Instead we eat our breakfast and go to work as a plumber, an office administrator, a barista, a working artist, a teacher, a meat packer, etc. We have a subjective set of experiences defined by the fraction of the class we end up working within.

In our jobs, we rarely experience the other workers we interact with *as fellow workers*. As an office worker, one might not ever experience the call center employee, or the janitor, as anything other than an abstraction, or an annoyance when they do something “wrong.” And when we leave work, we confront other workers not as fellow workers but as customers.

Imagine if you will, the main street of a small town. There are offices, stores, apartment complexes, restaurants and cafes, and at a corner of the town there is a warehouse, where much of the town’s goods pass through. We could spend all day arguing which part of the economy we as socialists should focus on. But we could spend a great deal of energy organizing their workplaces, and even succeed in organizing parts of it, and we still might not have a “working class” present in this town but a collection of militant and disconnected unionization campaigns. Prices rising due to one worksite increasing labor costs or causing layoffs in one sector of the economy demoralize workers elsewhere, one part of an office may become organized while the other isn’t, teachers getting raises lead to higher taxes, etc.

Now, some of our comrades may look at this picture and see the problem in the choice of site: that we should have just focused on the warehouse in order to take power over the chokepoint of the town. Regardless of whether you could succeed there or not, this position accepts as a given that the class is fragmented and we can only organize individual fragments, neglecting the possibility of unification. Whatever fragment you choose to start with, you will run up against the ruling classes’ ability to turn worker against worker, and the ways those divisions are etched into the mundanity of our daily lives.

So, organizing specific workplaces might not create a unified working class just because of the divisions within the economy. Let’s make these divisions less abstract. Imagine a prison, where prisoners labor for a dollar a day, or a food packing plant that primarily hires migrant labor. In both of these instances, the objective working class of the region is divided between a citizen/free working class and a migrant/incarcerated working class. This division is not just one of bigoted and patronizing attitudes, it is a legally defined “color line” protected by the force of the state.

These divisions can push white workers to align with their landlords and bosses, a cross-class alliance of whiteness aligned against the “outsiders” ruining the community. Further, these white workers will do all that they can to move from being subjugated alongside imprisoned/migrant laborers to the one doing the subjugating, by jumping into small ownership. A contractor can simply own a car and be willing to use precarious labor and suddenly he is no longer a worker but an employer, whose employees are kept in line by the internal wall within the labor market, an internal wall staffed by very well paid police/immigration officers. We can

decry that fascist bargain, but it is a response to a real condition: they are divided from their fellow workers by a real barricade of armed men. Increased carceralization, and increased pressure on migrants, can then be seen not as attempts to lower crime or migration, but rather as a form of labor regulation, fortifying the wall that divides the working class from itself.

This is not an incidental problem that we can hope to solve somewhere down the line. It is not a separate problem which we can carve out from our theory of class. Segregation, oppression, and violent bigotry are not sad exceptions. They are *the* history of the vast majority of the US labor movement. We cannot extricate politics from our work, organizing the class until we're at the point where we can confront these outside divisions, because the outside is already in: 'high politics' is inscribed into every interaction the working class has with itself.

The real United States of America has been defined by a colonial regime of states of exception to our generalized '[civil libertarianism](#).' In the midst of the writing of the Constitution, as Madison fretted about the "[the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority](#)", here meaning the possibility of a united group of farmers and freedmen, no such unity existed. [21% of the population](#) of the United States was either indigenous or a slave at the time, and white people born outside the US were characterized by yet another set of carve outs until the Naturalization Acts of 1790. This system of groups of people run under separate laws is a characteristic of all [colonial societies](#) for a reason. From the British codification of the caste system to Israel today, division is a useful way to make sure your 'overbearing majorities' can never culminate into one force.

In the US today, while white and propertied Americans have had the full protection of the law since the country's founding, Indigenous people, black people, migrants, and Arab Americans have existed as police state categories, open to the full force of an increasingly powerful security regime. This system of divisions has now been deployed against the whole US working class, as we saw on the U of R picket line. This must be faced head on: accepting division anywhere accepts division everywhere. To fight this system, we need a formation based around a program which is able to confront these divisions and *unite the class*.

## The Real Movement

*"Considering that against this collective power of the propertied classes the working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes;"--Karl Marx's resolution to the 1871 London Conference of the International Workingmen's Association*

When we organize workers or comrades we are not organizing them into idealized theories. They join real organizations with real histories and real sets of policies. So when we organize workers, they are joining the contemporary US labor movement. So what is the state of the real movement?

The labor movement in the US is both heavily regulated and in a 50 year long state of decline. Tremendously brave and tactically ingenious organizing has occurred alongside the continued hollowing out of traditionally organized industry. Strikes are on a slight rise but within a heavily regulated broader movement. So much of the remaining 9.9% of unionized labor is in public sector unions are usually disallowed from striking by anti-strike laws like the [Taylor Law](#). But further, even when we talk about the reality of the organized working class in the United States, we are talking about unions which represent at most a sector of workers. This is the legacy of the [Taft-Hartley Act](#) which exists to ensure that even when workers are organized, workers remain divided.

These unions *should* primarily represent their workers, they are after all the representative body of a particular kind of worker, but this system has produced many comorbidities. It doesn't take much effort to list moments when labor unions have acted against the interests of workers as a whole. You can see it in the Teamsters' support for the [XL Pipeline](#), which would pollute and destroy native lands in the name of 8000 jobs (of which a negligible number were permanent positions). You can see it in labor's gestures at support for Trump's tariffs, which will shortly destroy our economy. When different sectors have reactionary interests, that is, interests which place them against other workers, the unions of those sectors must represent those sectoral interests.

You can see this at its clearest in one of the most well organized forces on any DSA chapter's enemies list, the police and prison workers unions. This organized body of workers is organized around the production and safeguarding of profit earned through oppression. Migrants form the backbone of the US food production and distribution system, from agribusiness to food packing to food service. The existence of a large population with fewer legal rights allows for an artificial inflation of the white petty bourgeoisie, who have little but petty capital and a will to exploit. Police officer, contractor, landlord—all benefit from the way our legal system creates subjects outside of the law, and combine to form the backbone of reactionary politics in the United States today. They act militantly for these rights, against any attempts at [police reform or accountability](#) while they develop intentional [media strategies](#) to continue to raise their budgets. Even amidst the restrictions on public sector labor actions, New York State even faced a rare wildcat action when prison guards illegally [went on strike](#) for the right to be more violent towards inmates.

But this is not the only story. As labor has declined, out of both desire and necessity, the labor movement has begun to move beyond strictly sectoral organizing through 'amalgamation from above.' This dynamic, where labor unions have begun merging into each other to pool resources, saw it's clearest example in the 2004 [unification of the textile workers in UNITE and hotel workers in HERE, in order to use UNITE's treasury towards organizing in the growing service sector](#). These mergers have led not to the unification of workers, but rather the bureaucratic management of larger and larger numbers of workers and ever more focus on staffing and policy change to resolve the problems of labor. While the labor movement's amalgamated and focused on successive attempts at bills now called the PRO act, labor density has dropped by half to moving below ten percent. These union staffers are really tremendously

capable people, but as Communist Caucus says, “We need mass proletarian institutions that can be used by their rank and file as vehicles for the class struggle ,” and we know that the amount of organizing required to get even the ~18% labor union density we had before the PATCO strike would require so much more than genius staff.

If we want labor organizers to innovate in ways that will challenge the undemocratic structures of the current labor movement, we need something that can support them outside that movement. That support needs to be consistent, and it needs to consistently act for the whole of the working class, for democracy within the labor movement, and against the dividers of the working class in the state.

All of this said, there are a number of positive developments. [Letter carriers](#) and [federal workers](#) are both organizing against the Trump administration’s unhinged destruction of the administrative state, in ways that are opening up previously disallowed forms of organizing. Social unionism, conscious efforts by rank & file unionists to work for the benefit of the whole working class, [has won the ideological battle among labor militants even as far back as the 1990s](#). But these are still just trends in a largely divided and depoliticized labor movement, and for us to succeed efforts will need to be consciously brought together.

This is all in agreement with Communist Caucus, but I will move further. The question being asked here, which we have only given unsatisfactory answers to, is the question of the party. The greatest shift in union strategy in this country occurred in the 30s, as the Congress of Industrial Organizations began organizing mass employment factories. Left wing unions adopted anti-racist and anti-sexist policies during this period, starting a slow process that would culminate 30 years later in the civil rights and feminist movements. Many of these changes were led by the Communist Party of the USA (the CP), who was doctrinally opposed to the national oppression of African Americans and women. That change outpaced the CP (and non-official Communists), and the Taft-Hartley Act was passed in the hopes of closing the pandora’s box on party intervention into labor. In my lifetime, the left has proceeded with a desire to innovate past the problems of the current moment, to iterate through practice until we find a satisfactory answer. But we have had a satisfactory answer for at least 175 years, an answer so effective that the state still asks whether its employees are Communists.

We cannot keep asking labor questions that only a party can answer. Only a party, that is an organization which acts for the whole of the working class, can make these consistent interventions. DSA is currently organizing the Emergency Worker Organizing Committee alongside the United Electrical Workers. That is one of the bright lights of this current moment, but it needs to be expanded, generalized, and politicized under a shared program. Becoming a party is not about changing a word or making a declaration, it’s not about a state agreement or a line on a ballot. [It is about acting together, as a unified force](#). We need to unite, towards a clear set of shared goals, if we’re to solve the problem of disorganization.

## Break Down The Walls, Unite the Class

*Oh the FBI is worried, the bosses they are scared, they can't deport six million men they know.  
And we're not! gonna! let them! send Harry over the sea. We'll fight for Harry Bridges, and build  
the CIO! -- The Almanac Singers, [The Ballad of Harry Bridges](#)*

So we need a party that intervenes in and connects different issues, with a program standing against the political divisions the state imposes on the working class. What priorities does such a strategy entail?

Over the 2010s an [argument emerged](#) that the socialists should prioritize a fight for universal, economic reforms as a way of connecting workers and turning workers into a class for itself, while avoiding the problems of a perceived overfocus on particularistic identity issues. The argument emerged in a very different ideological atmosphere where socialists needed to differentiate themselves from a liberalism brought together by a striver identitarianism, but it was always wrong. It accepts and continues the United States' colonial policy, where Indigenous people, Migrants, Prisoners, and since 2001 anyone associated with 'terrorism' (in practice Muslim and Arab Americans) are regulated under separate rules. This policy of divide and conquer has always been used to divide the workers movement, and to win we need to turn this logic on it's head. These "particular" struggles are in fact fragments of the one *real* universal struggle Marxists have always stood for: the struggle for a genuine democracy.

Democracy is how the worker's movement discovers its progressive element, how it becomes something larger than itself, something that can speak for more than a handful of labor councils and socialist organizations. Internally democracy allows the working class to truly work together, breaking down our subjective divisions (prejudice, alienation, lack of experience). Externally, the struggle for democracy, for the equal rights and personhood of empire's victims, is the way we concretize the solidarity between fragments of the class and build a universal movement. It is how we break through the objective--and often physically real--walls the state has built through the workers movement.

The links built in the progress of the struggle for democracy can only strengthen and empower the workers movement, allowing for people from utterly different lives to work together as equals fighting our shared oppressions, both within and without the workplace. It will allow workers to spill out of the sectoral walls the state has built into the labor movement. And make no mistake--I am not suggesting that socialists in general or DSA in particular sideline or cease our interaction with the labor movement, or that we section ourselves off into a pure segment of the labor movement. Far the opposite--we need to enter the labor movement in greater numbers than ever, we need to all work with or within EWOC, but we also need to recognize that we are intervening into the labor movement to *change* the labor movement. That could be so much more powerful if we did it with a common purpose.

It is for this reason that Marxist Unity Group is proposing a [program](#) which puts the fight for political freedoms first. We view the revolutionary struggle to bring democracy to this country to be *the* most important thing for us to work for, because it is under democracy, true democracy free of legal delineations and second class citizens, that will allow workers to rule. We need to fight against, as Communist Caucus argues,

*the objective structural constraints of the US constitutional order—a federalized republic with anti-democratic minoritarian features and legally-encoded respect for private property relations...Fighting on this stilted terrain makes the impetus to abandon socialist principles and adopt “pragmatic” positions overwhelming.*

We can decide to fight this, rather than accepting it as a permanent ceiling to our organizing. Agitating against the thing which limits all of our ambitions is a thing we can do right now, not a stage we need the Angel of History’s permission to get to. We *need* to do that, in fact, if we’re to be serious about changing our social relations. A program which acknowledges and aims itself against *the* thing preventing a generation’s worth of political energy from manifesting into anything would be able to unite so much more than DSA. It could be used to unite with a tremendous number of social forces *towards clear and universal goals*.

These goals need to be targeted, directly, at the end of America’s colonial rule-by-division. Establishing equal rights across residency and criminal status, the abolition of prison slavery, the ending of the US security state and the special policing of Palestinian and Arab Americans, these are not abstract questions which do not come up at all in the process of organizing. Each of these divisions affects even the most economic of organizing, and they need to be pointed to. By treating them as carve outs--by treating Palestinian solidarity, migrant justice or prison abolition as something we should be good on separately of a need for ‘class based’ organizing, we are accepting the colonial logic of our so-called nation that these are separate questions at all.

Accepting division anywhere accepts division everywhere. The working class, purposefully fragmented by the capitalist class and imperial state, is born and lives everywhere in chains, kept from our siblings by a series of high walls guarded by well paid fascists. Organizing workers in this or that cell is important but alone it will never bring us together. We must use the battle for democracy to break the chains which bind us and destroy the walls between us. We must use that fight to further organization in every shop and building. Only that will get us to liberation.

[Please give to the University of Rochester Graduate Labor Union strike fund.](#)