

MIDWEST SOCIALIST

WINTER 2018



DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA

MIDWEST SOCIALIST is published four times per year by the Chicago chapter of Democratic Socialists of America, for its membership and contributing branches. Chicago DSA can be reached at:

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Want to catch up on last year’s DSA convention, the first meeting of DSA’s new National Political Committee and more? Visit MidwestSocialist.com

ABOUT THE COVER ART

Since this is a winter issue, I put together a collage of Midwestern snowscape photos to create a quiet, wintry scene. Here snowflakes—often used as an insult against individuals in the left for embracing our differences—are replaced with rose petals. Although shown as sporadic and individual here, we know the petals together form a rose—the symbol for the DSA. While we are all unique in our own ways, it is our strength in building something together that makes this big beautiful movement happen.
—Carrie Rumancik

FOR MOST OF ITS HISTORY, the Chicago Democratic Socialists of America chapter has had its own newsletter. Once it was called The Chicago Socialist, once it was DSA News, and most recently it was New Ground, headed by longtime Chicago DSA stalwart Bob Roman.

As DSA’s membership exploded after the turbulent 2016 election, we set out to design a newsletter for a new era. When Bob was publishing New Ground, Chicagoland had a single unified DSA chapter. Today, the Chicago DSA chapter boasts more than 1,000 members across three branches, and the state of Illinois counts at least six chapters and organizing committees. And it’s not just Illinois—Iowa, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan each claim five or more DSA chapters and organizing committees.

As the Midwestern chapter with the greatest resources, Chicago DSA decided to do what any good socialists would do—share the wealth.

We’ve expanded New Ground and made it Midwest Socialist. We see it as a platform to clarify socialist values, spread our message, and create regional solidarity among Midwestern DSA chapters.

We hope, however, that the articles we publish aren’t just interesting to DSA members but to Lyft drivers without affordable healthcare, to union rank-and-file fed up with conservative union leadership, to Bernie Sanders voters seeking a new outlet for those political energies.

After all, this is the engine of socialism: getting all working people on the same page. Since we all share the same struggle, we will only be liberated once we all work together.

DSA is a multi-tendency organization, meaning we welcome people with different ideas about what socialism

Content has been supplied by Midwestern chapters of Democratic Socialists of America. Inquiries about future submissions can be sent to:

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is and how we should achieve it. But this is what we all agree on: socialism means bringing democracy to all parts of life. It’s democracy in full bloom. As socialists, we believe that democracy doesn’t just mean voting for politicians. It means building unions that democratize the workplace. It means fighting for financial reforms that democratize the economy. It means that every citizen, regardless of race, gender, age, or ability has their voice heard in the halls of power.

And we understand that that is precisely what politics is about—power. At the end of the day, capitalists believe that power should be concentrated among a small ruling class. Socialists believe that power belongs to the people.

It’s no coincidence that DSA has grown so fast during this time of great political upheaval. At the same time that American politics grows more dire, a window of opportunity grows wider. The picture seems bleak—wages remain stagnant as inequality runs rampant; the promises of the Civil Rights era remain unfulfilled; America’s longest war drags on overseas as education and infrastructure crumble at home. But the solution lies in realizing that all of these things are connected. They are the direct result of deliberate decisions. They are the fruits of capitalism. The path forward starts with recognizing that we can change this if we work together.

That’s what Midwest Socialist exists to do. We want to link the fight for police accountability with the fight to close the gender pay gap. We want to link the struggle against big agribusiness with the struggle against school privatization. To do that, we must link Iowa with Illinois, Minnesota with Missouri. Only through collective struggle can we create a more equitable, more democratic society for all people.
—Charles Austin

A MIGHTY RIVER

A speech by Chicago Alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa

The following is a transcript of a speech given by Chicago alderman and DSA member Carlos Ramirez-Rosa at a Chicago DSA event on October 14, 2017. This speech has been edited for length and clarity.

For those of you that don’t know me, my name is Carlos Ramirez-Rosa and I’m the alderman of the 35th Ward. In that capacity, I’m proud to represent 55,000 working people on the northwest side of Chicago. I came into that role because I knocked a bunch of doors. I was up against a 12-year incumbent who had the backing of the mayor of the one percent, but what we had in our corner was people power.

I went out there, along with dozens of volunteers, every single day. I knocked doors religiously and I had conversations with real people about the issues they were facing.

When they would say, “Well, I want a new alderman because we need to fix this pothole,” we had a conversation about why the city was prioritizing corporate welfare instead of providing services to black and brown neighborhoods across our town. When people talked about how it took them two hours to get to their job, we talked about the need for affordable housing around public transportation. We talked about the need to expand public transportation and fund public infrastructure.

Those conversations politicize people. But they didn’t just politicize people, they helped me win with 67 percent of the vote on election day.

After we were elected—and I say “we” because it was a collective of people that said, “We’re going to seize power here in the 35th ward for working people”—we continued to knock doors.

When Donald Trump was elected, and he said, “I’m going to deport record millions of people,” more than the previous Deporter-in-Chief Barack Obama, we said, “We’re going to knock our neighbors’ doors and talk to them about their constitutional rights should law enforcement or ICE come and knock on their door.”

One of the problems we faced was that a lot of the volunteers didn’t speak Spanish. But when they would go to a Spanish speaker’s door and give them a piece of bilingual literature, even though they couldn’t have a conversation with them, they would look at that literature and they would say, “Thank you.” Because they understood that they were there to help them.

So just imagine if you went to someone’s door that you couldn’t have a conversation with but you handed them a piece of literature with a list of free healthcare clinics where they could go and get help. You think they’re going to be angry at you? No. They’re going to say thank you.

Those door-to-door conversations with people are how we break through the dominant narrative that’s fed to us through the corporate media every single day and build

the political revolution that we so desperately need.

I’ve got another example for you. Affordable housing. Other aldermen were like, “You don’t want to build affordable housing in your ward. If you’re going to build affordable housing in your ward, you can only build it for seniors, you can only build it for veterans. Your voters or constituency will revolt if you come to them and say we want to build affordable housing for working people, for poor people.”

A private developer came to me. One of the things that you might not know about Chicago, or the U.S. in general, is that right now, we’re really not building public housing anymore. What we’re doing is we’re building “affordable housing” by giving public money to private developers. So the Chicago Housing Authority has hundreds of millions of dollars to build affordable housing, but they’re just giving it to private developers.

But, this private developer comes and says, “I want to build affordable housing in your ward.” And we thought about it, as a collective, and said, “Well, that’s fine, we’re going to be with it, even though it’s not the ideal way that we want it built.” Because once we win we’re going to make it public again. But we didn’t tell that to the developer, right? Because that’s a long-term goal.

But we said, “Alright. You’re going to build it.” And we said, well, “In order for you to get my support, we have to have a community assembly, where the community comes out and discusses this proposal and decides whether or not it’s in their best interest, because all development in my ward has to go before a community assembly.”

And the developer said, “Well, we don’t think that’s a good idea, because any time we have these public meetings they just turn out really, really bad.”

But what we did in my ward is we went out and we knocked doors. For the weeks leading up to that meeting, people went to their neighbors’ doors and talked about the need for affordable housing in their community, talked about why this project was so important, talked about the specifics, and invited people to come out to that community assembly and voice their support.

When we held that meeting in a packed room in a school theater, only one person spoke out against the proposal. And the criticisms of the project came from the left. People asked that developer, “What are you going to do to make sure that folks with a criminal record can apply to live in this house? What are you going to do to make sure that people that have undocumented family members can get a unit in this building?”

That is what’s possible when we go door to door and we build working-people power.

Sometimes I think about capitalism like a dam; it’s just kind of holding us all back. And we are all just these individual drops of water. When you’re outside and you feel a drop of water, you’re like, “Oh, I can ignore that,” right? But when all those little drops of water come together, that’s when we become a mighty river. That’s when we become a flowing force of water that can tear that dam down—that can tear down that corrupt capitalist system and nourish the earth. Are you all with me, sisters and brothers?

UNREST IN ST. LOUIS

By Sean Duffy

DSA Joins Activists Demanding Police Accountability

ST. LOUIS—In 2016, former St. Louis police officer Jason Stockley was charged with first-degree murder for the 2011 shooting death of 24-year-old Anthony Lamar Smith. Last September, before the Stockley verdict had even been passed down, Missouri Governor Eric Greitens was preparing for the fallout.

Greitens readied the state's National Guard the day before the trial concluded, stating that he was "committed to protecting everyone's constitutional right to protest peacefully while also protecting people's lives, homes and communities."

The governor's remarks not only signaled that Stockley was likely to get off—as most cops do in these kind of cases—but also that the state was ready to stand by and defend that decision by any means necessary.

Months later, the civil unrest that has resulted in St. Louis shows no sign of slowing down.

St. Louis DSA has been involved in the upheaval since the verdict was first handed down in the last days of the summer. The chapter is young—it was only founded at the beginning of 2017—but has already grown to 200 dues-paying members. The local is part of a growing coalition of activists groups, including Missouri Jobs with Justice, Metropolitan Congregations United, the #ExpectUs organizers, and other local socialist groups that are working together to challenge the systematic racism and police brutality that's been etched into the fabric of the city on every level.

"The direct actions in St. Louis against state violence, police brutality, the egregious racial injustices and treatment of black folks have built Y'allidarity across this region," said St. Louis DSA electoral chair Ben Conover.

Conover defines "Y'alladarity," a term popularized by DSA chapters in the South, as a "portmanteau of the classic Southern pronoun 'y'all' and the classic organizing principle of solidarity." It's a rallying cry for Southern socialists.

But the St. Louis demonstrations didn't just build camaraderie among protesters. They also "forced our mayor to appoint a new public safety director," Conover said. "We believe we are making serious progress towards implementing the Ferguson Commission's recommendations across the region."

Conover and other DSA activists across St. Louis and the South see their hometowns as prime territory for DSA

to organize within.

"The material conditions of rural, working-class Missourians are ripe for socialist organizers, even if there is still lingering animosity toward the 'S' word," Conover said. "They've been used and abused by the bourgeois through corporations and trade policies that don't [improve] their lives materially. They don't have health care. They hate the liberal establishment. They voted for Trump. Our chapter in St. Louis sees an opportunity to build a coalition of working class people and we're working to see that happen."

Case in point: organized labor in the state led a historic ballot campaign to put a stay on right-to-work legislation pushed by the governor, smashing signature expectations in the same rural areas that had voted heavily for Trump.

The local has seen its own confrontation with the St. Louis police. During an October 3 protest put on by the #ExpectUs organizers, demonstrators stopped traffic on Interstate 64 (known locally as Highway 40, or "Fawty"). Police arrived and began arresting participants of the action en masse, including many members of St. Louis DSA.

"The officers decided they were arresting everyone in [our] group," Conover said. "They had us sit down on the street and zip-tie cuffed us, including hitting an older woman with a riot shield in the wrist, causing significant bruising. We were taken from South Jefferson to the Justice Center downtown, where we were processed."

Police processed 143 arrests for Conover's group. Law enforcement's treatment of the arrestees while in custody was no better than their treatment on the streets.

"Many protesters never saw a nurse, and at one point they put over the maximum number of women in a holding cell," he said. "Transfolks were misgendered repeatedly, including an officer asking 'What even are you?' to one of them."

It's worth noting that none of the arrested have received charges from the action and they were released without bonds or bail.

The different acts of vandalism the city has seen in the wake of the verdict are often highlighted as justification for the militarized police response. For many, those small acts of vandalism seemingly present a larger moral conundrum than the continued state-sanctioned murder and violence. To them, a need for the state to preserve

order will always trump any need to protect freedom of expression and dissent.

But it is not order that the state is after. Rather, the state seeks continued control and the return of public obedience. To reform or address the causes behind the continued civil unrest in the city would be an admission of wrongdoing and unlawfulness—everything that police and our governing bodies supposedly stand against. What they care about is preserving the illusion of order, and

those who openly question the legitimacy of their power—who challenge their authority to decide what is and what is not lawful—stand squarely in the way of enforcing that illusion.

But while the dead have long been buried and those responsible acquitted, layers of freshly shattered glass line the streets. That present-and-visible reality is not so easy to ignore.

Is there an end to the protests in sight?

"No," Conover said.

WHAT IS CLASS?

By Ramsin Canon

Socialists see class as an important part of politics

Class is central to Marxism and socialism, but it's surprisingly hard to pin down. We don't really have a natural language for it in America. American politicians are allergic to it. They talk about the "middle class" or "working families" but not the "working class" or "labor."

For socialists though, class is the starting point for any analysis that ends up with "socialism" as the answer.

To understand why, let's talk about what class isn't.

It isn't just a way to say "income" or "education level."

For Marx, class was a relation more than an identity like being "poor" or "uneducated." Your class is defined by your relation to the "modes of production," or the way the stuff we need to live is created. If you sell your labor time and power for wages so you can pay for the stuff, you're in the working class. If you own the "means of production"—that is, capital—and live mostly off the profit, you're in the capitalist class.

There is such a thing as "social class" based on income, or education, or cultural habits. We get this at a gut level: politicians put on a Carhartt jacket or awkwardly use slang. They exaggerate their humble beginnings. People hide or exaggerate their education depending on where they want to fit in.

But this isn't "class" in the way that radicals mean it. There are two classes based on their relationship to the modes of production. There are those who own the means and those who sell themselves to those who own the means.

In a complex system there are outliers, of course. On one side, there are independent professionals, like lawyers or doctors, but also managers, especially corporate executives or highly skilled specialists like accountants, who may technically work for wages but have a level of independence laborers lack. On the other hand there is the underclass—people who live and work in non-formal economies, petty criminals, etc. But in general, this is the "class relation": laborers who (a) have to sell enough work and time to live and to make a profit for (b) capitalists who live off the surplus.

The laborer has to sell their labor to live, because all of the tools are owned by another class. The individual identities of the laborers and capitalists can change. Laborers can become capitalists and vice versa. But in capitalism, the relation stays in place.

This is the struggle part of class struggle. Laborers need the tools—whether that's land, machines, or investment

WHY I JOINED DSA

By Audrey Steinbach

(What is Class? Continued)

dollars—to make stuff. Capitalists need workers to use the tools. They need workers to work hard enough to make not just enough money for themselves, but enough for the capitalists to live off as well. The struggle comes from this antagonistic nature of the “relation” the two groups have to the mode of production.

It’s important to see class as a relation instead of a pure identity (like your income or education level) because the relation determines a lot, no matter your income or education. Let’s consider an example.

Take two cousins, Country Cousin and City Cousin. The Country Cousin is a rural farmer who owns family farmland, a farmhouse and some livestock facilities. She has a high school degree and has taken some courses in agriculture. She wakes up each day, and her family and a few season hands from town work to harvest specialty crops she sells to a regional produce distributor. At the end of the year, after paying her creditor bank, her income and property taxes, her suppliers, health insurance from a rural co-op, and her workers, she holds \$30,000 for herself and her family. She owns her home and her land, which she inherited as a portion of a larger family estate. Living in a rural area, her cost of living is low. After taxes and expenses, \$30,000 certainly doesn’t make her rich, but her family’s most basic needs are met and she can access credit when she needs it, although life is still fairly precarious.

Her City Cousin is a nurse’s aide 10 years on the job. She has an associate’s degree and a certificate in her chosen work from a city college. Her schedule is different every week. She has little control over her workplace, with layers of supervisors and managers, some of whom are tyrannical and even abusive. After taxes, she makes \$30,000 a year—some of which goes to rent, some to student loan debt, some to commuting costs, some for supplemental healthcare.

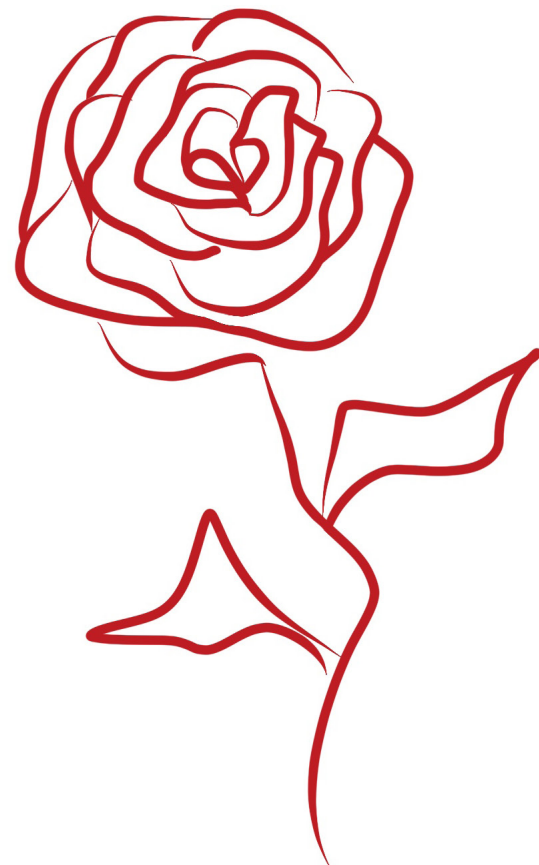
City and Country Cousins may well have a different analysis of their struggles. The cousins may have a similar hate of banks and creditors, but Country Cousin is going to be very concerned about her property rights, government regulations about how she treats her seasonal employees or complies with state agricultural or environmental rules. Her relation to how she gets by leads to fundamentally different social (and ideological) concerns.

City Cousin wants workplace regulations. She wants it to be easier to unionize. She wants taxes to make commuting cheaper. She wouldn’t mind seeing rent control imposed on landowners. She wants more control at work—including telling her abusive boss to shove it. The character of her struggle results from her relation to

the mode of production.

To be clear, though, both cousins may (rightly) see their problems are coming from the specific ways the capitalist system works. A small farmer is punished by the growth of big agribusiness monopolies, abusive bank and credit practices, and cash-starved governments that don’t keep up infrastructure. But her subsistence is still built on the things that the capitalist class relies on—strong property rights, market exchange of goods, and a wage system that creates profit. That matters when at times of crisis it becomes necessary to fight for changes in the system.

“Class” is a relation to the way the stuff of life is created. It is tied up with other systems of oppression that are more readily identifiable by fixed markers—for example, race or gender or disability. Class is distinct because it can be fluid for individuals, but fixed as a feature of capitalism. It sets in motion a particular kind of struggle, which is in-born to the class relation. If you have to sell to someone else enough of your time both to live yourself and create enough surplus for them, you’re set in a struggle that won’t end until the system is swept away.



I’ll be honest, I cried the night of the 2016 presidential election. I’m sure a lot of people did. But when I watched the results come in I didn’t want to believe it. I was pissed, shocked, sad, scared, everything. I felt so hopeless. This was a common sentiment among my family, friends, and acquaintances. But the next day, I joined DSA.

I have organized with political campaigns in the past, and after Bernie lost the nomination I had a weird feeling. I started volunteering for the Hillary campaign because I was scared of the alternative. I went to the Chicago Hillary HQ every week and phonebanked for them but this still didn’t put me at ease. I’ll always remember, in the Hillary Chicago offices, seeing a poster of Hillary in sunglasses with the words “Madame President” below it. This poster was hilarious to me. I just kept thinking, “How does she know? How can they be so confident?” After the election, I realized that this holier-than-thou attitude in politics had to change. It wasn’t right and it wasn’t resonating. I guess that’s what drove me into action. The similar feelings that everyone was having but also the sour taste the Democrats left in my mouth.

Why DSA... Honestly I hadn’t heard about DSA until another DSAer from Milwaukee turned me onto the podcast Chapo Trap House a few days after their first episode came out. I know this isn’t a story that a lot of people like to hear about how folks came to the DSA, but that’s my story. Chapo and Twitter helped me realize that these were the folks that were going to get things done. They were the only people I saw calling the Democrats out and I liked and respected that.

I didn’t really have much of a theoretical or literary foundation coming into DSA. I knew what was right and wrong and that both parties in America weren’t

really getting it. Being able to talk with comrades with different approaches to socialism has helped me realize how a society truly grounded in socialism can lift up all of us. I’m still learning but being around people that are wickedly smart when it comes to history, theory and labor has been an awesome experience.

My most memorable experience with DSA in my year since joining has been a few different experiences rolled into one. What I mean by that is in the recent months I have seen other DSAers on the street or on the train and they’ve come up to me to say “hey,” even if we hadn’t chatted much before or never knew each other that well prior. This type of unbridled camaraderie is what I love about DSA and is what will be vital in our efforts to upend the current political structure ensnaring our nation. Plus it’s nice when someone says hi to you. I feel like people don’t do that much anymore.

Every day there is something worse happening in the world. It’s really hard to keep your head up, especially in the face of everything else that happens in people’s immediate day-to-day. It’s hard enough to stay positive with my own problems, and looking outward to a world that seems to be spiraling further and further into a void of morality and hope is depressing. DSA has given me a glimmer of hope that we can fight back against all odds. My comrades have helped me stay sane by understanding that we can’t tackle everything at once, and that when we support each other, we will win.

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DR. KING'S DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM

By Charles Austin

One August day in 1966, Martin Luther King, Jr., arrived in a white neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest Side to join about 700 protesters fighting housing segregation. The protesters were outnumbered by hostile counter-protesters. One held a sign saying "King would look good with a knife in his back," according to The Chicago Tribune. Another struck King in the head with a rock, causing him to fall to one knee as bodyguards circled in to protect him.

It's convenient to imagine that King's struggle for racial equality was confined to the South. But King knew that racism was alive in the North as much as the South. It's also convenient to see King's struggle as confined to race. To King, racial injustice did not happen in isolation. It was not possible to separate racism from militarism from poverty. King stood against both imperialism and racism and understood that capitalism was the thread tying them together. In fact, King was an avowed democratic socialist. In a 1961 speech he said, "Call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism, but there must be a better distribution of wealth within this country for all God's children."

Even those who acknowledge King's radicalism often try to paint it as a development that happened at the end of his life. Because he began to expand his struggle for racial justice into initiatives like the Memphis sanitation workers' strike and the Poor People's Campaign, there's the appearance that his radicalism was just taking shape at the time of his assassination. But King was always a radical. He favored things like union rights and full employment as well as free education, free healthcare, and a radical redistribution of wealth.

He had deep misgivings about capitalism at least as far back as 1952. In a letter to Coretta Scott that year, he wrote "I imagine you already know that I am much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic." He

continued, "Today capitalism has outlived its usefulness. It has brought about a system that takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes."

This was more than a decade before his historic speech at the March on Washington. It was long before the Democratic party first embraced him and longer still before the party abandoned him over his strong opposition to the Vietnam war.

King won significant victories for marginalized communities by playing a role in pushing the LBJ administration to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But these victories speak more to the power of organized social movements to force legislative outcomes than to any fellow-feeling between MLK and the LBJ Democrats. On the contrary, American empire had a powerful disdain for King.

Perhaps the most damning example comes out of the FBI's COINTELPRO program designed to surveil and discredit political activists. The FBI sent King an anonymous letter calling him an "evil, abnormal beast" and which ended with a threat that King interpreted as an inducement to suicide. An uncensored copy of this letter is held at the U.S. National Archives.

The great tragedy of King's dream is that, half a century later, it remains largely unfulfilled. It has been watered down and wrung out. It's been drained of its radicalism, and in turn, its significance. But King left us with a valuable blueprint for creating a better world. It's only possible when people of different races, religions, and genders organize not just against one injustice or another, but against the broad power structures that prop up all injustices. King shows us that the battle for economic justice is in fact inseparable from the battle for racial justice. Dismantling capitalism will not solve all our problems, but it will bring us closer to the world King dreamed of but did not live to see.

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