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IT'S OFFICIAL, six seats on Chicago's city council will now belong to DSA members. The results surprised the city's powerful democratic establishment and even DSA's own members, most of whom haven't seen the left this strong in their lives.

This victory was years in the making, with roots stretching back to the Chicago Teachers Strike in 2012. The strike showed Chicagoans the power that organized labor could wield and inspired organizing in the broader community. In 2015, Tim Meegan, a teacher in the 33rd Ward took on the incumbent alderwoman, Deborah Mell, whose father Dick Mell had run the ward for decades before passing control over to her in 2013. Meegan fell just short, but the structures left over from his campaign became 33rd Ward Working Families. That same year, Carlos Rosa, not yet a DSA-affiliated candidate, ran and won in the 35th Ward.

These experiences built a foundation on which the next four years of organizing could grow. As the Bernie Sanders campaign and later the Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez campaign raised public awareness of Democratic Socialism, Chicago DSA built partnerships with community coalitions focusing on local issues like lifting the state ban on rent control and demanding civilian oversight of the police.

It was important to Chicago DSA leadership that the chapter's endorsement do more than provide a name a candidate could list on their website. It needed to come with a commitment of people power. The membership

came out in force for candidates throughout the winter, with members knocking doors in the snow, donating individually to campaign fundraising efforts, and volunteering for leadership positions in the campaigns. Chicago DSA members were joined by volunteers from other socialist organizations as well as unions and community groups.

The convergence of left-leaning groups created a broad progressive movement that captured the imaginations of voters throughout the city. This paired with a backlash against the corruption constituents were seeing regularly in the local news, creating a clear path for DSA's candidates.

On election night there were tears and hugs all around but also thoughts to the future of the movement. How should we wield this new power? How can we continue this momentum? What does it mean to be a democratic socialist alderman? The hope is that the relationships built since 2012 are strong enough to withstand the pull of corruption and the erosion of exhaustion. The working class of Chicago proved that with limited financial resources and a clear vision of the future it could take on the ruling class and win. And it feels like momentum is on our side.

— Sarah Hurd
Chicago DSA

Electoral victories in Chicago

By Steve
Weishampel

How the city's new Socialist Caucus was built

April 2 was a landmark day for Chicago DSA. Six DSA members won seats on Chicago's city council. I'd like to examine how we got here: what our process was like, how it made our victories possible, and how it can inform future electoral campaigns across the country.

The quick version is this: a thorough and laborious process; democracy with as few edicts from the top as possible; as precise an understanding of our capacity as possible; trustworthy allies; and tight cohesion with our issue campaigns.

At some point in the last year I'm sure I've called our candidates and volunteers unbelievable, magical, incredible. But I'd like to make it clear: No miracles happened here. None of this was supernatural, none of it was magic, and none of it was preordained. Like everything else in the world, our electoral outcomes were built on labor.

I was co-chair of the Electoral Working Group from February 2018 to February 27, 2019, the day after the citywide election.

During my year in leadership, the EWG was immensely busy. We rewrote Chicago DSA's endorsement process, vetted candidates, endorsed a successful campaign to defeat a county judge, wrote and distributed candidate questionnaires and reviewed candidates' responses, interviewed candidates, debated their merits, and voted on recommending candidates to the Chicago DSA membership.

Throughout the process, we imposed very few rules or even guidelines on what members were or weren't allowed to consider when they voted. We didn't ratify a platform, for instance, which would have restricted members' ability to consider candidates. People were encouraged to vote their conscience, which is a better guide than any document, platform or mandate.

We never formally passed, ratified or recommended any standards for endorsement. We only debated them, then asked members to apply whatever criteria they wanted, because those are political questions that should be debated and decided by the membership, not by a document.

One of the toughest questions we grappled with was how many candidates we should endorse. We agreed before issuing any that we didn't want our endorsements to just be a stamp of approval with no

meaningful work behind it—one of the only rules we passed, written into our endorsement process—and we knew we'd receive more requests than we had the bandwidth to support.

Some members argued we should only endorse two candidates in October and wait to see how races developed before considering any others. The argument was that we'd need to save our capacity for important races and not overextend ourselves. I advocated for endorsing five candidates in October.

Ultimately, Chicago DSA successfully supported five races at once; we aimed much higher than just two and were rewarded for it. Unfortunately, we didn't endorse DSA member La Spata in his race. He won without us, which is reason to celebrate, but it was a missed opportunity to build a stronger relationship with La Spata.

It turns out that as we endorsed more candidates, our capacity grew rather than shrank. As we endorsed in different neighborhoods across the city, that brought out DSA members who live in those neighborhoods.

Almost every analysis of our victories has mentioned that we didn't accomplish this alone, and we worked closely with movement allies and ward-level organizations to win these races. Spun negatively, some have said we couldn't win races on our own.

That is true. We couldn't do it on our own, and we shouldn't. Why would we take on a candidate with no movement allies or ward-level organization behind them? We needed those supporting organizations for practical reasons, since it's a big city and our members are scattered, for political reasons, since we have a better chance of winning if we aren't doing all the work in a campaign, and for philosophical reasons, because if a candidate only has us then that's a clear sign that they're not fully engaged in the movement and haven't built anything yet.

Lots of left-liberals in Chicago love to talk about "independent" candidates, candidates not beholden to various "machines" in Chicago politics. They can keep them. Give us movement candidates, ones who are most definitely beholden to the working-class movements that get them elected.

I hope we can replicate the results of 2019, but even more than that, I hope we can replicate the decisions we made. I'd much rather back a loser than back a candidate who doesn't fly the red flag.

UNPACKING MARXISM

By Ramsin Canon

What it means to be a Marxist in the modern world

It's unfortunate that there isn't a better word for "Marxism." Marx himself famously once said that he himself was "not a Marxist" if certain askew interpretations of his theories of historical materialism and capitalism were "Marxist." Part of the problem is that the theories and processes that Marx helped create are too big to fall under a single -ism; Marx was a philosopher (and sort of historian) of political economy, that is, the study of production and trade in relationship to laws, customs, and human systems, whose theories helped inform numerous other disciplines and practices: economics, sociology, history, literature and practical politics, among others.

The closest analogy that I can think of is to what we would today call "Darwinism," the theories of nineteenth century biologist Charles Darwin. Darwin didn't invent biology, paleontology, genetics, or any of the numerous disciplines and practices that are informed by "Darwinism." And in fact, there are many aspects of classical "Darwinism"—the theories and conclusions arrived at by Darwin and his immediate disciples—that have been outright revised or rejected by people who today would still consider themselves "Darwinists." Since Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, hundreds if not thousands of scientists and philosophers have expanded on and improved on Darwin's theories (the so-called "modern synthesis")—obviously a necessity since during Darwin's lifetime there was no deep concept of molecular genetics.

It's useful to think of Marxism the same way. Marxism is not a detailed plan for how to create socialism. Marxism isn't a moral philosophy, in the way that the Enlightenment philosophers and their progeny—like John Rawls—tried to build up moral systems from first principles to determine what is the most "fair." It does not instruct us to engage in violent insurrection.

Marx, through his analysis of human society, gave us an understanding of the laws governing how society develops and how we can understand the process of history. His theories of alienation and class struggle inform us as to the causes of

human misery and the obstacles to human flourishing. This is the "historical materialism" that is the strongest single thread of his work. Historical materialism is, simply stated, the theory that human societies develop according to how the "forces of production" are ordered, and that the features of a society will, ultimately, relate back to the ordering of the forces of production. People will "relate" to the system of production as a class. Therefore, the core conflict in society has been between classes on opposing sides of the systems of production—this is the dialectical part of his theory.

Just as Darwin was not the first "evolutionist," Marx was not by any means the first socialist. And as with Darwin and the word "evolution," "socialism" meant something fairly different before Marx came along. Socialism was basically a moral system, sometimes rooted in Christian values, utopian in character and justified based on what was "fair" or "just." Marx and Engels spent much of their active years differentiating their theories from prior theories of "utopian" socialism built on moral persuasion—Engels going as far as to publish a book-length pamphlet on it.

Darwin revolutionized existing theories of "evolution" by introducing the concept of natural selection over geologic time—he should better be remembered for the theory of natural selection than evolution; the early title of his book *Origin of Species* was *Natural Selection*. In the same way, Karl Marx took existing historical and philosophical analysis of human society and political economy and applied an objective approach, from which he developed the theory of historical materialism/dialectical materialism.

What Marxism teaches us is simply to approach questions of society from a material basis: how does human life persist? Through production of the goods and services needed to live. How are these things produced under capitalist society? Through exploitation of the labor of the working class, that is, by requiring one class of people to sell their labor as a commodity to another class to produce values. What is the result of this system? That workers are "alienated" from their labor, meaning

from much of their waking life, constantly required to produce more and more with an ever-precarious access to the means of subsistence.

If we want to engage in political competition and analysis of what Marx would have called “political economy,” there isn’t an alternative to Marxism that has anything near its explanatory power or guidance. That said, I understand the caution many socialists or social democrats may have to subscribing to “Marxism”: Marx’s focus on class “struggle,” the “overthrow” of the capitalist class, and the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” all of which may strike modern American ears as prescriptions for violence and authoritarianism.

It’s important to understand what Marx meant by these things.

The class struggle doesn’t necessarily mean barricades in the streets and summary execution of plutocrats. That these things can result from struggle is a historical fact; but the “struggle” Marx is talking about is the social and political competition between classes, which is always present: whether in the form of wage demands, petitions, law changes, strikes, non-compliance, all the way up to armed revolt. In the Manifesto, Marx describes how sometimes, the capitalists will cave in to demands made via demonstrations and strikes; other times, they will resist until concessions are forcibly extracted. Only the relative strength of the sides determines the nature of the struggle. The whole point of Marx’s method is to understand that the struggle is inherent to the capitalist system; it is objective. How socialists choose strategically to win the struggle depends on many factors, including the avenues available to them to win changes to the system—this is subjective. Whether we like it or not, the way commodities are produced under capitalism will always require struggle between the classes; workers want more, capitalists want them to have less and less.

As for “overthrow,” Marx looks at how previous systems of production were ended and changed into new forms: from hunter-gatherer to militarized, to slave chiefdoms and kingdoms, to feudalism, and then to capitalism. It is true that these transitions were generally marked by periods of violent competition; but (just like with Darwinism) historical

study has showed that the violent outbursts were not the chief or only means of change. In fact, decades, sometimes centuries, of smaller changes accumulated over time to put stress on existing systems and bring about major changes. This is especially true of capitalism, which arose in Europe not all at once after the French beheaded enough nobles, but took place over an extended period beginning as far back as the Fourteenth Century. The growth of state-like kingdoms, “free” trading cities, incremental changes in technology, improvements in communications and logistics, and changes in legal systems eroded the basis of feudalism; the French Revolution was one part of a much longer and broader process of change.

Perhaps most misunderstood is the idea of the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which comes from the Manifesto and a work called Critique of the

Gotha Program, but is often interpreted according to the later theories of Vladimir Lenin. The dictatorship of the proletariat does not mean revolutionary terror against class enemies and the death of freedom. It means something very simple: look around you. Do you see how in “free market” democracies, political power is monopolized (or nearly monopolized) by the

ownership class? The “dictatorship” of the proletariat just flips this. For Marxists, the dictatorship of the proletariat simply means a period where political power is held in common for the sole benefit of the working class. Getting to this point requires the working class to realize it is in fact a single class, and acting in its own interests. That this be accompanied by violent revolution isn’t necessary.

Dictatorship is bad. We live under a form of dictatorship today: a dictatorship on behalf of the capitalist class. This doesn’t mean working class people have zero freedoms; it means that the states we live in are specifically organized to protect the capitalist system of social relations. Some people can own the means of production and the rest of us have to sell our labor to survive. The dictatorship of the proletariat just inverts this: it organizes the state to preserve the common ownership of the means of production.

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Marx and Engels were critical of moral and “fairness” arguments for socialism because they were ahistorical; they lacked a truly rational basis, and were therefore just formed by ruling class ideology. This isn’t unique to Marx, either: a contemporary philosopher, Bernard Williams (no socialist himself) is among the definitive moral philosophers who rejects the idea that we can reason our way to morality. Historically, the forces of production—the thing that determines human flourishing—had never been reordered through moral argument; it had required engaging in struggle—in political competition. Marx was not trying to provoke people into violence. He was merely exposing and acknowledging that the forces of production create a class struggle, which will resolve in a change to the forces of production.

As socialists post-Marx, as with biologists post-Darwin, we merely accept the material reality of the system we live in. The forces of production rest on exploitation to extract “surplus value” and requires commodifying labor, which alienates workers. Struggle is inherent to the capitalist system. Only when workers become conscious of themselves as a class and act on their own behalf will they act to affirmatively end the system. There isn’t really a deep question of morality here; this isn’t about fairness. It is about the struggle between those who control their own destiny and are not alienated from their means of subsistence (capitalists) and those who want this condition for themselves, but are kept from it (the working class).

A word about violence. Like most people, I abhor violence. Violence degrades its perpetrators as it harms its victims. Marx does not prescribe violence, although he does treat it as an obviously common outcome of periods of dramatic change in the forces of production—that is, in periods of “overthrow.” We need to ask ourselves whether major social change has ever avoided violence, and where that violence came from. Consider the U.S. civil rights movement, treated in historical memory as the best

example of change from “non-violence.” But wasn’t there violence? The fact is that the state, and individuals, reacted to the demands of Black Americans with violence. There was violence during the civil rights movement; it just wasn’t meted out on a large scale by those demanding their rights. And once those demands were won, there was “violence” of another sort—when the state prosecuted and rounded up hate groups, like the Klan for example, that was a sort of state “violence” we would consider appropriate. Not to mention that attacks on freedom fighters, whether they were freedom riders, civil rights lawyers, or a person protecting their home from a lynch mob, always entailed violence.

And what about the labor movement? From private guards to local police to the federal army, violence was regularly called down on those engaging in struggle to win rights in the workplace. The U.S.

labor movement, in fact, was particularly marked by violence, even over its European counterparts, especially in the mountain west where mining and energy concerns regularly called down armed forces to break strikes. Struggle for the workers were strikes and non-compliance; the reaction was violence.

In historical struggle, those clinging to the system under attack are the first to resort to violence. To be a Marxist doesn’t require belief in an armed uprising to bring about a new world, in violent change or authoritarianism. It just means acknowledging as a fact something that already exists: the class struggle. The tactics and strategies workers employ to achieve class consciousness and act to end the exploitative system

are ours to determine.

Why contemporary socialism is entwined with Marxism is this understanding of how history moves and how it will move, based not on the moral arguments we make, but on the objective conditions we live in. Workers will not struggle against abstract principles but against living human beings with material interests. In his Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, Marx wrote that “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.” We can only change the world if we truly understand the actual forces around us. If we want to change the world, we need to be in it, to build from it; to truly be in it, we need to understand it. That makes us Marxists.

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Why a Eugene Debs comic?

By Paul Buhle

On a foundational figure in American socialism

Since my own teenage years in downstate Illinois more than a half-century ago, I have been drawn to the historical figure of Eugene V. Debs. It's easy to understand. Not only did he get a million votes as a forthright socialist and anti-war activist in 1920, he led the greatest railroad strike of the 19th Century. He helped found the Industrial Workers of the World in Chicago in 1905. He traveled ceaselessly, careless of his own deteriorating health, to deliver the message of socialism.

He brought working people of all kinds together, and gave them hope, as well as giving them a plan for organizing.

"Debsian Socialism" is the name that many historians give to the 1900-'20 period of the US Left because Debs stands for so much within it. The hundreds of local socialist newspapers in many small towns and in many languages; the deep connections with American reform and radical history that found Civil War veterans drawn to him, along with activists for unions, women's suffrage and African American rights; the commitment to socialist education, not only for people new to socialist ideas but for socialists themselves to better understand their world so as to revolutionize it.

The "Doctrine of Debs" was and is to get outside of our comfort zones, to reach and teach all around ourselves, to become engaged in struggles directly where we can, and support them from a distance where we cannot join directly. It is an International doctrine of peace and transformation around the world.

So a Debs comic was natural for me, an SDS veteran of the 1960s, publisher of a magazine called *Radical America* for SDSers and others, and historian of the Left in all its varieties, with all its strengths and terrible weaknesses. Actually, the story may start with me interviewing hundreds of old-time radicals who could recall the 1920s and even earlier for an archive at NYU. The story picks up with the publication of *WOBBLES!*, a comic about the IWW that Debs defended so ardently. And goes on through "my" comics, always created with collaborators, on Che Guevara, Rosa Luxemburg, Abe Lincoln, Emma Goldman, Paul Robeson, and others.

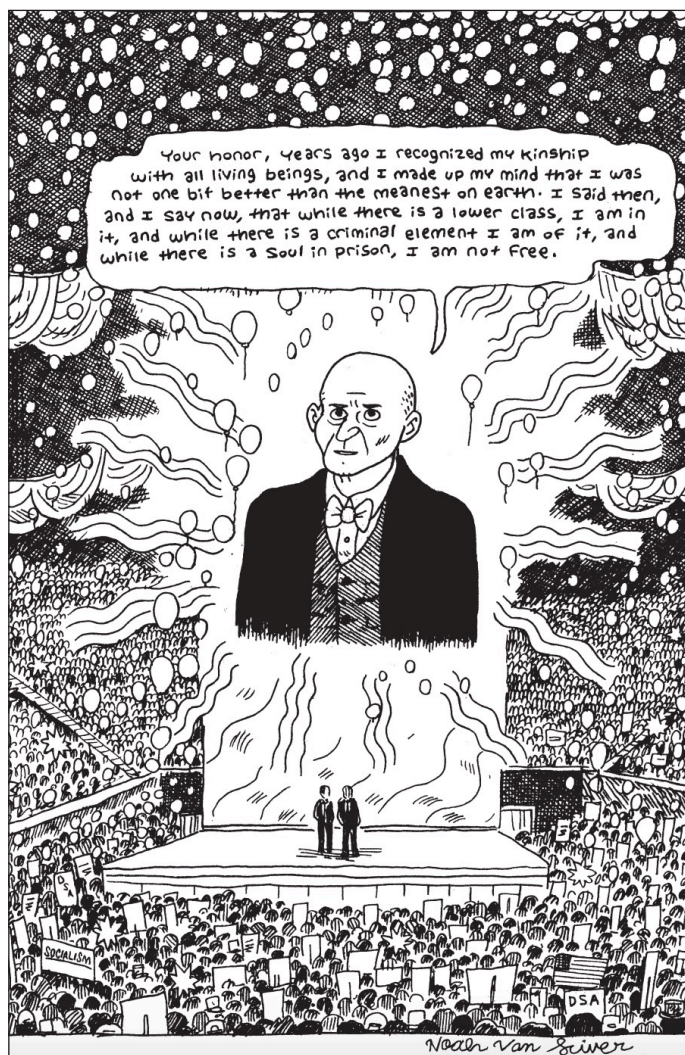
Comics can be "didactic" and teach lessons. But they are also artistic creations, in the case of the Debs comic, an extraordinary artistic creation by Noah van

Sciver, one of the admired younger artists in the field today. I only wrote the script (with two collaborators, one of them a founder of SDS).

Van Sciver interpreted the script most artistically, and when I see the pages that he produced, I am stunned by their beauty and sheer creativity.

A preview of the Debs graphic novel...

A taste of Eugene V. Debs: A Graphic Biography, which you can find on Amazon as well as in bookstores, is available on the back cover of this magazine, as well as below.



1912: The Greatest Socialist Campaign!

Debs at the height of his national popularity, was an unhealthy 57, with arthritis and other ailments, but the Red Special train made hundreds of stops across the country.



Through all the ages of the past the few have ruled and the many have served; the few have worn the purple of luxury and the many have struggled in poverty. The Socialist party is the political expression of the Socialist movement in the emancipation of the working class from wage slavery.

