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The Labor Issue



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State of the Unions

by Paul Garver

When introducing the 2007 Labor Day issue of *Democratic Left*, labor historian Mel Dubofsky wrote:

Union membership as a proportion of the employed labor force has fallen to levels unseen since the depression of 1893-97, the deepest trough in union density prior to the present. Wage and salary earners have fallen on hard times during the past six years as real wages and earnings stagnated. Workers have held their own materially only by laboring longer or sending more family members into the labor force. Along with stagnation of wages, such protections as health insurance, guaranteed pension benefits and job security have all been weakened or vanished. All this while the Haves accumulated greater income and wealth.

Dubofsky concluded by asking readers of *Democratic Left* to debate how to reverse the dynamics that over a half century have decimated unions and produced insecurity and misery for millions of working people. Beginning in January 2008, DSA's labor blog *Talking Union* has accepted his challenge by posting some 1280 articles (more than one a day) from a widely diverse group of contributors on virtually every issue related to unions and working people. We can safely say that neither has the underlying trend towards union decline been reversed, nor has a consensus been reached on all that needs to be done.

This Labor Day issue of *Democratic Left* is based both on selected articles that have recently been posted on *Talking Union* and on original essays reflecting on the same major themes:

Union Organizing

This issue includes a *Talking Union* article by David Green (Detroit DSA) reporting on an organizing victory by the Detroit Restaurant Opportunity Center. Even in today's hostile climate, creative and prolonged struggles have produced union organizing victories, including an election at an IKEA factory in Danville, VA (Machinists), a first contract at Rite-Aid's Southwest Distribution Center in Lancaster, CA (ILWU), and union recognition for sales clerks in New York branches of the Swedish clothing chain H&M (UFCW).

Union Renewal

David Duhalde's review of Steve Early's *Civil Wars in U.S. Labor* continues the discussion of democratic insurgencies within the labor movement. The continuing relevance of this debate is underscored by the National Labor Relations Board's recent decision to overturn SEIU's electoral victory over the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) in the largest unit at Kaiser Hospital, because of collaborative electoral misconduct by both Kaiser Hospital and SEIU. This decision ironically coincides with organizing efforts spearheaded by SEIU and other unions to support proposed changes in NLRB regulations that would expedite elections for union representation.

Talking Union frequently carries favorable stories about the political contributions of SEIU to building local community-

labor coalitions, such as MassUniting. It is by no means evident that political organizing has to be counterposed to internal member mobilization. A case of a union that appears to walk on both legs is National Nurses United, which both mobilizes its members to support its Main Street Contract for America and carries out effective strike threats that win good contracts for its members.

Chris Maisano's article on "The Death and Life of U.S. Labor" briefly surveys some of the economic and political dynamics that have contributed to the labor movement's decline in the last few decades, and offers some steps that activists could take to reorient the labor movement toward building for a mass working-class upsurge against attacks on workers' rights and living standards. The insurgency of public employees and their supporters in Wisconsin suggests that bottom-up movements can change the political prospects for unions and workers. In recent weeks *Talking Union* has posted various interpretations of the success or failure of the recall election efforts in Wisconsin. As Amy Dean points out in her comments on the umbrella political coalition We Are Wisconsin, electoral organizing has to contribute to a lasting mobilizing effort beyond Election Day. This is equally applicable to state and local levels.

Unions and Global Solidarity

David Bacon's article on the "Rebirth of Solidarity at the Border" typifies *Talking Union*'s coverage of the struggles of working people across borders. After Bacon wrote his article, the United Steel Workers of America and the Los Mineros union of Mexico signed an extensive solidarity agreement outlining progressive steps that could lead to a full merger of these two major North American unions.

Other articles have highlighted the Steelworkers' support for the Mexican union Los Mineros, and the hope for actual merger of the two unions. *Talking Union* also regularly covers the struggles of Chinese workers for better wages and conditions and the right to elect their own representatives. The most exciting international developments for workers in 2011 have been the transformation or overthrow of corrupt official trade union structures in Egypt and Tunisia.

One fervently hopes that the insurgent spirit that has gripped working people around the world will soon make its way to these shores.

As of this writing, 45,000 Verizon workers have suspended their strike, while difficult bargaining continues. Despite its record profits Verizon is attacking the "Cadillac" healthcare benefits CWA and IBEW have won through previous collective bargaining. Rather like the assault of Midwest Republican governors on the bargaining rights of public employees, Verizon is threatening to cripple private sector organized labor at one of its remaining strong points. Total support for the Verizon workers from all sectors of labor and the progressive community remains vital. ■

Paul Garver is a long-time labor movement activist, a leader of the Boston DSA local, and a member of the DSA National Political Committee.

The Death and Life of the US Labor Movement

by Chris Maisano

Compared to its counterparts around the world, the U.S. working class has been rather quiet in the face of austerity. One major reason why this country has not yet seen the kind of mass protests against austerity that we've witnessed from Greece to Chile is because our labor movement is comparatively weak, small, and fragmented.

The numbers don't lie. In 2010, the national unionization rate was a shade below 12 percent. For the first time in history, public sector unionists outnumber private sector unionists. Union density is largely concentrated in the Northeast, the Upper Midwest, and the West Coast, while it remains very low in the South and Southwest – the fastest growing areas of the country economically and demographically. The attack on public sector workers, coupled with the ongoing economic downturn and deep budget cuts at all levels of government, ensures that these numbers will be even lower next year. The struggle at Verizon notwithstanding, strikes almost never happen anymore. Total days idle from major work stoppages (involving 1,000 workers or more) during the decade 2001-2010 were down over 90 percent from 1971-1980.

How did the once-mighty US labor movement reach such a sorry state? Is there any chance that it might be revived, and if so, how?

Globalization, Technology, and the Production Process

The political economy of global capitalism has changed radically over the last forty years. After World War II, the economies of Europe and Japan were utterly devastated and the U.S. strode the globe as the undisputed economic superpower. U.S. capital could tolerate the existence of a comparatively limited but not insignificant welfare state as well as a large and powerful labor movement. By the early 1970s, however, the European and Japanese economies recovered, and their industrial firms began to compete intensively with U.S. firms in key sectors such as automobiles. With increased competition and a massive wave of global labor unrest came reduced profitability and the watershed recessions of the mid-1970s and early 1980s, the deepest and most disruptive series of downturns the global economy experienced since the Great Depression. From the perspective of capital, something had to be done to restore profits and discipline workers.

Popular discourse, as well as the mainstream discourse on the left, focuses on the role of globalization in transforming production and shattering the material base that sustained the postwar labor movement and the working class communities that constituted its social base.

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Democratic Socialists of America share a vision of a humane international social order based on equitable distribution of resources, meaningful work, a healthy environment, sustainable growth, gender and racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships. Equality, solidarity, and democracy can only be achieved through international political and social cooperation aimed at ensuring that economic institutions benefit all people. We are dedicated to building truly international social movements – of unionists, environmentalists, feminists, and people of color – which together can elevate global justice over brutalizing global competition.

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According to this perspective, deepening international economic integration opened up the U.S. market to cheap imports from countries like China and forced U.S. workers into competition with exploited workers in the Global South, undermining the domestic manufacturing sector and offshoring millions of blue collar jobs. One often hears the lament that this country simply “doesn’t make things anymore.” To be sure, international economic integration has deepened over the last four decades. At the same time, total manufacturing employment has declined from a high of over 19 million in 1979 to about 11.5 million in 2010, a loss of close to 8 million jobs that disproportionately impacted union workers.

But there are compelling reasons to doubt that globalization per se is the driving factor behind the decline of manufacturing employment and the concomitant decline of the industrial unions. The number of manufacturing jobs lost to offshoring in recent decades is simply too small to account for the magnitude of job losses in this sector. The driving force behind long-term job loss in the former strongholds of the labor movement is increased investment in labor-saving technology, which has allowed companies to dramatically expand productivity while reducing the size of their workforces. Even though the expansion of Chinese production capacity in recent years has been nothing short of staggering, the U.S. is still far and away the largest manufacturer in the world, outproducing second-place China by about 40%. U.S. companies are still very good at making stuff – it’s just that technological innovation allows them to make lots more stuff with a much smaller workforce than was necessary during the postwar era.

The Attack on Workers’ Power

At the same time, capital waged an all-out offensive against workers’ power on the shop floor and at the bargaining table. Beginning in the 1970s, U.S. unions began to lose a majority of their attempts to organize non-union workplaces. Of course, this was not because union organizers en masse suddenly became terrible at their jobs. Management came to see the violation of workers’ rights to organize unions, and the relatively minimal sanctions the state imposed for such illegal behavior, as part of the cost of doing business. Such management practices persist today and have given rise to the multi-million dollar “union avoidance” industry. American Rights at Work, a non-profit organization that advocates for workers’ rights, estimates that during unionization drives, 25 percent of employers fire at least one pro-union worker; 51 percent threaten to close a work site if the union prevails; and, 91 percent force employees to attend one-on-one anti-union meetings with their supervisors. The punishment for such behavior is not nearly strong enough to prevent management from breaking the law. An employer found guilty of illegally firing an employee for union activity only needs to give back pay to that worker, minus whatever he or she has earned since the firing. And even if workers manage to win union

representation, employers are allowed to repeatedly appeal and delay the result, giving them additional opportunities to fire, harass, and intimidate workers. Many newly-organized unions never even get to negotiate a first contract.

The integrity of the electoral process set up by the National Labor Relations Board has deteriorated so badly since the 1970s that most unions that aggressively organize new members avoid it whenever they can. The right to organize unions has, to a significant extent, been eliminated in the United States.

Sectoral and Geographic Shifts

So where did all of those superfluous manufacturing sector workers go? Many of them, along with most of the women and immigrants that entered the labor force starting in the 1960s and 1970s, went into the rapidly expanding service sector. At the same time, much of the remaining industrial sector in the US has shifted geographically from the old union strongholds of the Northeast and Upper Midwest to the South and Southwest, regions traditionally hostile to union organization. Fierce employer resistance to unionization, as well as the right-to-work laws that prevail throughout these regions, makes it incredibly difficult to organize unions in the first place and to maintain them if workers actually manage to win an organizing drive.

Today, the labor movement is more accurately described as the public sector labor movement. Private sector unions are on the verge of extinction, with density at 6.9 percent, while public sector density remains quite high at over 36 percent. But as the current assault on public sector workers demonstrates, the labor movement cannot survive in the public sector if it is all but dead in the private sector. As union membership as a whole declines, it is very easy for anti-union politicians and ideologists to portray public sector workers as a privileged class that enriches itself on the backs of struggling workers in the private sector. Though the attack on public sector workers has been met by large, spirited demonstrations in Wisconsin, Indiana, New Jersey, and other states, the labor movement has thus far been unable to turn the tide.

Diminishing Returns: Labor and the Democratic Party

Labor has tried to make up for the decline in membership and economic power by increasing the scope and depth of its activities within the Democratic party. Since the early 1980s, it has shed almost all pretense to non-partisanship and identified itself almost exclusively with the electoral fortunes of the Democrats, contributing hundreds of millions of dollars in members’ dues money to politicians at all levels of government.

There are severe drawbacks to this strategy. It allows Democrats to take labor’s dime and votes for granted even as they pursue a policies that do little to advance labor’s agenda while blocking the emergence of an effective political alternative. It allows labor’s opponents to paint it

as a partisan special interest group. Finally, union strength tends to be concentrated in the Northeast and Upper Midwest, areas that are declining in population and hence Congressional representation – while the largely union-free South and Southwest grow demographically and thus in Congressional representation. This political strategy does little to protect labor’s institutional needs and interests, advance a progressive, pro-working class political agenda, or build support for the movement among the vast majority of U.S. workers who remain outside of the unions.

From the Ashes of the Old

This is a pretty pessimistic assessment of the state of the U.S. labor movement. But as the saying goes, pessimism of the intellect must be paired with optimism of the will. The accelerated drive toward austerity pursued by the Obama administration and neoliberals in Congress will, I am certain, push the working class to mobilize in defense of its interests and living standards. Workers won’t submit to such attacks indefinitely, and they don’t need a union to tell them to fight back. It is impossible to predict what forms this upheaval will assume, and there is likely not much that activists in and around the labor movement can do to summon it into existence. What we can do is lay the groundwork so that spontaneous outbursts of working class resistance might be mobilized toward progressive and politically constructive ends. Here is a very modest list of steps activists could pursue to help prepare the way for a labor movement for the 21st century:

Reach out to non-union workers, students, and youth: To avoid political isolation, the labor movement must defend the interests of the working class as a whole, not just its current members. Among other steps, the AFL-CIO could refashion its Working America program from a narrowly-conceived canvassing operation into a real force for labor-community-youth solidarity and mobilization.

Re-establish political independence: Labor needs to put a price on Democratic betrayals by sponsoring primary campaigns against politicians who spurn its agenda. At the state and local level, in areas where geographic concentration of union members and sympathy for the labor movement remain high, unions should also seriously consider sponsoring independent, labor-based campaigns for office.

Support new forms of worker organizing: Labor should increase its financial and organizational support for non-traditional forms of worker organizing like non-majority unions and worker centers. This may be the only way that the labor movement might be able to gain a foothold in the South and other regions traditionally hostile to organizing, as well as among immigrant and low-wage workers often ignored or underserved by the established unions.

Expand membership and popular education: Working class subcultures and infrastructures of dissent shattered by the end of the postwar order need to be rebuilt in order to offer an ideological alternative to the hegemonic neoliberal “common sense.” Intensive progressive political education and social/cultural activities for workers inside and outside unions could help to reconstruct the collective identities needed to sustain a labor movement for the 21st century.

Shake things up: as the demonstrations and occupations in Madison demonstrated, mass rank-and-file action from below has the potential to change the balance of political forces and win broad public support for the labor movement. In an age of bipartisan austerity, lobbying, electioneering, and dealmaking will not be enough to turn the tide. It’s time for workers to stand up and fight back. ■

Chris Maisano is Managing Editor of Democratic Left and chair of the New York City DSA local.

Justice Is Served: Michigan Restaurant Workers’ “Groundbreaking Victory”

by David Green

After a 15-month-long workplace justice campaign over employment discrimination and wage violations at the Andiamo of Dearborn restaurant, the Restaurant Opportunities Center of Michigan (ROC-MI) and Andiamo Restaurant Group have achieved a groundbreaking victory.

Andiamo Restaurant Group has agreed to a confidential settlement agreement that includes innovative anti-discrimination measures, complete resolution procedures, and training, break, uniform, and equipment policies, as well as translation of employment materials for non-English speakers.

This marks a groundbreaking victory for metro-Detroit restaurant workers and the service industry as a whole. In an industry riddled with countless cases of poor employment

standards in restaurants across the region, ROC-MI and its community allies successfully supported and fought for justice for the Dearborn workers.

In encouraging high-road practices, ROC-MI has helped ensure that Andiamo of Dearborn will be a better place to work and a more socially responsible place to dine.

The campaign, kicked off when restaurant workers and dozens of supporters delivered a demand letter to management during dinner service in November, 2010, mobilized well over 1,000 community supporters who joined the restaurant workers in their demand for justice.

Using a mix of creative tactics that included the appearance of caped crusaders for worker justice, prayer vigils, satirical “sing-in’s” by guests during dinner

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service, and a flash mob and brass marching band that sang “Don’t Get Caught in a Bad Restaurant” to the tune of Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance,” the campaign drew upon a wide range of supporters. Students, union members and leaders, faith-based groups and, immigrant rights activists, as well as community and social justice organizations all participated in weekly protests outside the restaurant.

Over the course of the year, the local chapter of the DSA mobilized dozens of members to participate in the picket lines. “Our deepest thanks go to the DSA and the countless community members who chose to stand with the workers in their time of struggle,” says Minsu Longiaru, the coordinator of the Restaurant Opportunities Center of Michigan (ROC-Michigan).

The campaign drew national attention in June 2011, when it was one of the highlighted struggles at the United States Social Forum in Detroit.

In September 2010, the UAW International and the Metropolitan Detroit AFL-CIO announced a boycott of all Andiamo-affiliated restaurants in metro Detroit.

This agreement means that the UAW and the Metropolitan Detroit AFL-CIO’s boycott of Andiamo Dearborn and all affiliate restaurants of the group is over.

The UAW and Metropolitan Detroit AFL-CIO support ROC-Michigan’s efforts in the interests of working people everywhere.

“The UAW is committed to continued involvement in struggles for workers’ rights and social justice regardless of industry or union membership,” said UAW President Bob King.

“We’re pleased to see the principles of solidarity have once again worked,” said Rory Gamble, Region 1A

director. “Region 1A is proud to be part of a struggle that has led to the settlement between Andiamo and ROC. It’s clear when all workers unite, justice prevails.”

“The Metropolitan Detroit AFL-CIO is pleased with the outcome of this situation. We have been with the restaurant workers from day one and it is important that they be treated with dignity and respect. This settlement ensures that,” said Metropolitan Detroit AFL-CIO President Saundra Williams.

ROC-Michigan is a Detroit-based workers center dedicated to improving working conditions and opportunities for advancement for all Southeast Michigan restaurant workers. ROC-Michigan is an affiliate of ROC-United, a national restaurant workers’ organization. Like all ROC affiliates, ROC-Michigan pursues change in the restaurant industry through a tri-pronged strategy that includes: (1) workplace justice campaigns that hold exploitative employers accountable; (2) research and policy work that promotes better conditions in the restaurant industry; and (3) promoting “high-road” practices in the industry.

The DSA looks forward to continuing to work closely with ROC-Michigan in pursuit of justice for all restaurant workers. What’s up next on the menu? The opening of COLORS of Detroit in 2011 – a worker-owned restaurant that will train Detroit residents for living wage jobs, serve fresh, healthy and locally-sourced food, and support workers’ involvement in the city’s growing food justice movement.

For more information see: www.rocunited.org. ■

David Green is chair of Detroit Democratic Socialists of America

The Rebirth of Solidarity on the Border

by David Bacon

The growth of cross-border solidarity today is taking place at a time when U.S. penetration of Mexico is growing – economically, politically, and even militarily. While the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico has its own special characteristics, it is also part of a global system of production, distribution and consumption. It is not just a bilateral relationship.

Jobs go from the U.S. and Canada to Mexico in order to cut labor costs. But from Mexico those same jobs go China or Bangladesh or dozens of other countries, where labor costs are even lower. As important, the threat to move those jobs, experienced by workers in the U.S. from the 1970s onwards, are now common in Mexico. Those threats force concessions on wages. In Sony’s huge Nuevo Laredo factory, for instance, that threat was used to make workers agree to an indefinite temporary employment status, even though Mexican law prohibited it.

Multiple production locations undermine unions’ bargaining leverage, since action by workers in a single workplace can’t shut down production for the entire corporation. The UAW, for instance, was beaten during a strike at Caterpillar in large part because even though the union could stop production in the U.S., production in Mexico continued. Grupo Mexico can use profits gained in mining operations in Peru to subsidize the costs of a strike in Cananea.

The privatization of electricity in Mexico will not just affect Mexicans. Already plants built by Sempra Energy and Enron in Mexico are like maquiladoras, selling electricity into the grid across the border. If privatization grows, that will have an impact on US unions and jobs, giving utility unions in the U.S. a reason to help Mexican workers resist it. This requires more than solidarity between unions facing the same employer. It requires solidarity in resisting the imposition of neoliberal reforms like privatization and labor law reform as well.

At the same time, the concentration of wealth has created a new political situation in both countries. In Mexico, the PRI functioned as a mediator between organized workers and business. PRI governments used repression to stop the growth of social movements outside the system it controlled. But the government also used negotiations in the interest of long-term stability. The interests of the wealthy were protected, but some sections of the population also received social benefits, and unions had recognized rights.

The victory of Vicente Fox and the PAN in 2000 created a new situation, in which the corporate class, grown rich and powerful because of earlier reforms, no longer desired the same kind of social pact or its political intermediaries. The old corporatist system, in which unions had a role, was no longer necessary. Meanwhile employers and the government have been more willing to use force. Unions like the Mexican Electricians Union (SME) and miners face not just repression, but destruction.

In both Mexico and the U.S., the main union battles are now ones to preserve what workers have previously achieved, rather than to make new gains. Mexican unions are enmeshed in the state labor process, in which the government still certifies unions' existence, and to a large degree controls their bargaining. In the U.S. labor is endangered by economic crisis, falling density, and an increasingly hostile political system. This leads to a rise in nationalism and protectionism, creating new obstacles for solidarity.

As the attacks against unions grow stronger, solidarity is becoming necessary for survival. Unions face a basic question on both sides of the border – can they win the battles they face today, especially political ones, without joining their efforts together? Fortunately, this is not an abstract question. Enormous progress has taken place over the last two decades.

The NAFTA debate provoked discussion about the relationship between workers in Mexico and the U.S. Individual U.S. unions began looking across the border for themselves, seeking new contacts with unions opposed to the free trade agreement. Benedicto Martinez, the leader of Mexico's Frente Auténtico de Trabajo (FAT) traveled the U.S. in a free trade caravan organized by the Teamsters to build rank and file opposition to NAFTA. He remembers, "NAFTA shocked a lot of U.S. unions out of their inertia – not so much their national leaders, but people in local unions. They're the ones who began pushing the structure to move on globalization, to form new international relations and look for solidarity. That's what moved their leaders to pay attention to the border. It was people in local unions that began building the bridges across the border to unions in Mexico. The more local unions got involved, the broader this movement became."

Many union members responded by supporting efforts to organize independent unions in the border plants. "It was a kind of school," Martinez recalls. "It was not so easy anymore for someone to say that Mexicans were stealing jobs. They could see there was a real problem."

The border provided an area for experimenting with new ways to organize workers. The following decade saw an explosion of activity on the border.

The worker rebellion at the huge Sony factory was the first major battle under NAFTA, and the first place where the false promises of its labor side-agreement became obvious. Hundreds of workers were beaten in front of the plant when they ran candidates in their CTM union's election. When that door was closed, they tried to form an independent union, and were blocked by the company and the Mexican government. NAFTA's labor side agreement did nothing to change the situation.

In the late 1990s two strikes at Tijuana's Han Young factory led to killing fast track authorization in the U.S. Congress for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The independent union there became one of the first to successfully force the government to give it legal status. Those experiences in maquiladoras were the precursors of the later investigation into silicosis among striking miners in Cananea.

Over the years, support from many U.S. unions and churches, and from unions and labor institutions in Mexico City, has often been critical in helping these collectives survive, especially during the pitched battles to win legal status for independent unions. But overall that support has not been constant. Often the worker groups in the maquiladoras and the cities of the border have had to survive on their own, or with extremely limited resources.

Despite the flight of many jobs to China, a U.S. economic recession that has caused massive layoffs in border plants, and extreme levels of violence in many border communities, the maquiladora industry in northern Mexico is still enormous. Three thousand plants employ over 1.3 million workers. It's not just the size of the industry that makes these plants important. They've been the laboratories for the rightward shift in labor law and labor relations, now being applied to workers across Mexico. The states are a stronghold of political conservatism and corporate power, because of the disenfranchisement of their working population.

A vibrant and strong labor movement on the border would change Mexico's politics. The influence of the maquiladoras on U.S. employment and runaway production over the years is undeniable, and strong unions there would have a tremendous impact on U.S. labor too. The growth of labor solidarity in the last two decades between the U.S. and Mexico owes a lot to the border labor wars. It was there that U.S. unions first acquired a clear vision of the importance of their relations with Mexican workers. ■

David Bacon is a California labor writer and photojournalist. His latest book is Illegal People: How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants. A longer version of this piece was posted on Talking Union.

The Fall of the House of Labor

by David Duhalde

At a recent fundraising event for a city councilor in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I was drawn toward two UNITE-HERE staffers by their easily identifiable red and black shirts. I broke the ice by asking if they knew a friend of mine who worked at UNITE-HERE, my former supervisor at 1199 Service Employees International Union (SEIU). This sparked a discussion about National Union of Healthcare Workers (formerly SEIU United Healthcare Workers West), SEIU, and UNITE-HERE, all of which have been involved in major internal struggles among major labor unions. One of the trade unionists gave an optimistic spin on the situation: UNITE-HERE came out stronger because of their battle with the purple giant, SEIU.

I pointed to Steve Early's new book *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor*, to provide a counter-point. While his book focuses mainly on SEIU, Early also writes about Elvis Mendez, a fellow Massachusetts resident inspired to join the labor movement. At first attracted toward UNITE-HERE because it was more worker-led, Mr. Mendez found himself leafleting a workplace where SEIU was on the ballot, instead of mobilizing the unorganized. His union had no intention of running an election there, but merely wanted to punish SEIU for its transgressions against UNITE-HERE. Mendez said "I was essentially union-busting in a place where workers needed a union." I brought this story to them and said "was all this union infighting really worth it?"

The story of Elvis Mendez is only one of the many powerful and convincing aspects of Early's book. For me, however, the simplest and most powerful statement was the question of whether or not the union movement's resources are being well spent. I respect the UNITE-HERE staffers with whom I spoke, and I might even be sympathetic to what they faced as a union. I could not, in all due respect, agree that what they went through was "worth it." I saw first-hand how these civil wars – which seemed more like power grabs than ideological battles – hurt friendships, dampened morale, and channeled valuable staff time from organizing workers into a turf war. One can't help but think of the millions of dollars spent that could have been used in new organizing or building relationships with communities. Imagine if the current SEIU 17-city plan to reach out to nonunion workers to build grassroots participation in community groups had been done in 2009 before the midterm elections.

You don't need to read Steve Early's book to understand that the battle between major labor unions in the midst of a major economic crisis was worse than wrong. It was stupid. Distracted by internecine warfare, the combatants not only wasted massive amounts of their members' dues money – they failed to take advantage of the potential

political opening created by the meltdown of neoliberal capitalism. What makes Early's book a necessary read is the ideological framework he provides to critique this misguided era in American labor history. Moreover, as the previous story illustrates, he does so not only by critiquing the "democracy challenge" in SEIU, but in many other unions as well – including the supposedly sacrosanct United Farm Workers.

The emphasis on the need for democratic control of labor unions might be overlooked by those looking for some Andy Stern bashing. Likewise, those who wish to paint Early's work as a personalized vendetta may miss the broader institutional critiques he presents.

I have been active in and around the labor movement for over a decade. That includes student-labor solidarity, summer internships, and a few full-time jobs in the labor movement. I do not (and cannot) attempt to speak from the same kind of experience that other sisters and brothers in the union movement can draw on in addressing the many challenges confronted by organized labor in the U.S. .

What I can speak to is the question of democracy within large organizations like labor unions, and why this is not a question of personalities, but rather institutional structures.

Jerome Brown, a former Local 1199 and SEIU official in New England, was critical of *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor* in a recent issue of the journal *Social Policy* because of Early's reference to James C. Scott's book *Seeing Like a State*, his well-known critique of the elitism often found within large, bureaucratic organizations. Early drew a comparison between SEIU leaders making decisions for workers and the dilemma of working class democracy faced by the Bolsheviks in post-1917 Soviet Russia.

Brown writes:

Early reaches too far in his conclusion, comparing Stern's loss of faith in membership democracy with the Bolsheviks' loss of connection with the Russian proletariat. Stalinism in SEIU is a reach too far. Group-think on the executive board? Yes. Cult of personality for Stern? Yes. Elements of a Greek tragedy? Yes. All of these and probably a little bit more were present in SEIU. But the civil war in American labor – as troubling as it is – does not rise to the level of the arguments between Stalin and Trotsky.

This problematic simplification of Scott's and Early's works undermines their progressive message and democratic warning. To be sure, Andy Stern is not Joseph Stalin. But that's not the point. Trade unionists support democracy over authoritarianism because we believe working people should have a voice not just at the ballot box, but also in the workplace. Our critique of totalitarianism is not just about a few awful murderous dictators, but also the

lack of freedom for people to make decisions that affect them, and the right to free speech and free association that makes the exercise of such freedoms possible. Just because a union president is not corrupt doesn't excuse the lack of a democratic, participatory culture that defines life in most U.S. unions.

Such an uncritical attitude toward the labor leadership among some on the left is nothing new in U.S. history. During the Cold War, many left-wing anti-Communists in the U.S. criticized their Stalinist counterparts for being slaves of Soviet autocracy while turning a blind eye toward the elitist practices of those whom C. Wright Mills called "new men of power" at the top of the post-war labor movement. Likewise, Scott and Early tackle the tough fact that many progressive and egalitarian movements have utterly failed in their quest to democratize large, complex institutions. The scale of these failures corresponds to the scale of the experiment – a union local, a city council, or a national state. Personalizing such a problem avoids dealing with the real issue: that power must come from the bottom up, even (especially) within organizations that are at least nominally progressive in their political orientation.

It is a fool's errand to discuss whether Stern would become an American Stalin if he ever gained state power, or if any particular individual would abuse his or her position

of power more than another. We should do all that we can to avoid creating, fostering, and supporting organizations where too much power falls into the control of one person or a small group. Every organization, but especially a progressive organization, needs democracy because people are imperfect, power corrupts, and decisions should be made as collectively as possible. That is where the comparison between, say, an undemocratic union in the U.S. and a totalitarian party-state, comes into play.

The existence of a progressive and diverse leadership in a union does not excuse the existence of undemocratic institutional relations within the organization. This can be just as problematic (perhaps more so) as a leadership composed exclusively of reactionary white males. Why? Because the latter has no pretensions of enacting the kind of broad-based social and economic changes that radical democrats of all stripes wish to ultimately see in the world.

Those interested in fighting for a more democratic labor movement as an integral part of creating a more just and democratic society should read *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor*. ■

David Duhalde is a former Young Democratic Socialist National Organizer and is a leading activist in the DSA Boston local.



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For Our Fallen Comrades

by Rannfrid Thelle

The radical right wing “crusader” and counter-jihadist Anders Behring Breivik has admitted to carrying out the terror attacks in Norway on July 22nd. He was dressed in a police uniform when he was arrested, and claims to have carried out the attacks in order to draw attention to what he refers to as his “Manifesto,” which calls for a war against “multiculturalism” and the “Islamification” of Europe. Rannfrid Thelle, a Norwegian Labor Party activist who lives in Wichita, KS and is co-chair of Wichita DSA, shares her experience from the first couple of weeks after the attacks.

On July 22nd a violent fanatic launched the biggest attack on Norwegian soil since the Nazi attack on April 9th. First, he detonated a half-ton bomb outside government buildings in the capital, Oslo; an attack on the nation’s leadership. Then, in an hour-long eternity of terror, the perpetrator coldly, cynically and meticulously pursued Labor Party youth around on the island of Utøya, shooting them down one by one. On a slow Friday afternoon in the middle of summer holiday, Oslo was transformed into Beirut or Baghdad. And an island paradise of trees, brush, rocky bluffs and beaches, a grassy campsite and a few cosy buildings, turned into Norway’s biggest crime scene. The annual political retreat of the Labor Party’s rising leaders, where the best and brightest of our youth had only just finished presenting their visions of a just society, became the explicit target of a mass shooting.

From my home in Wichita, Kansas, I followed the live news streamings, as all Norwegians did those first few days. I was on the phone, on Facebook. My family members were all on holiday and not in Oslo as they otherwise would have been, but I knew quite a few young people who were at Utøya. I was able to reach a couple of them fairly quickly. What the survivors had experienced was beyond imagination. Interspersed between the first eyewitness accounts of the atrocities, however, were also some words that have become iconic, and that have come to represent the collective stance that the nation has taken in the face of these attacks.

One of these was a Tweet posted by Helle Gannestad, an 18-year old who survived the massacre, only a few hours after she was on dry land. “If one man can create so much evil, imagine how much love we can create together.” People around the world picked up her words when Stine Renate Håheim, a member of parliament who also survived the onslaught, quoted them on CNN. The leader of the Labor Youth wing, Eskil Pedersen, himself a survivor, was clear from the outset: “We are taking Utøya back.” He spoke of those who lost their lives, saying, “Together they wanted to make Norway and the world a better place. They stood together for justice, for solidarity, for equality and

against racism. This, someone tried to take away from us, but never have we stood more together than we do today. He took some of our most beautiful roses, but he cannot prevent the spring.”

Jens Stoltenberg, the Labor Party leader and prime minister, was unequivocal from the start: “I have a message for those who attacked us, and for those who are behind this. It is a message from all of Norway. They will not destroy us. You will not destroy our democracy and our commitment to a better world. We are a small nation, but we are a proud nation. No one will bomb us into silence; no one will shoot us into silence; no one will ever be allowed to frighten us from being Norway. Today, we are going to take care of one another, give each other comfort, talk together, stand together. Tomorrow, we are going to show the world that the Norwegian democracy is stronger when it really counts ... We must never stop standing up for our values. We must show that our open society will pass also this test, that the answer to violence is even more democracy, more humanitarianism, but never naïvité. We owe this to the victims and to their close ones.”

The nation was shocked. The collective response showed that people experienced this attack on the Labor Party as an attack on all the people of Norway. Spontaneous citizens’ initiatives to gather in torch marches turned into mass events in every major city and many small towns. Of Norway’s 4.7 million people, more than half a million came out to these events. The message was, “We stand together, we refuse to let this man win.” As the Prime Minister put it, “Evil can kill a human being, but never vanquish a whole people.” All parts of the population stood united in this stance, and Mayor Fabian Stang of Oslo, a Conservative, remarked when he spoke at the memorial gathering at Oslo’s largest mosque: “The perpetrator was white, Christian, and from my neighbourhood. But you didn’t stamp me as a terrorist. For this, I thank you.”

At many of the gatherings that took place in the first two weeks, memorial services, concerts, candlelight vigils, rose marches, and then funerals, one song has been repeated and become a new national anthem of sorts. This is the poem “To the Youth,” written in 1936 by the anti-fascist poet Nordahl Grieg. This anti-war song calls for a struggle that must be fought with the weapons of “faith in life and human dignity,” in a battle of love and dreams against war, death and injustice. The poet observes that someone who is carrying a burden on his right arm that is “precious and irreplaceable,” cannot murder: “This is our promise, from brother to brother: we will be good to humanity’s earth. We will protect beauty, warmth – as if we carried a child gently in our arms.”

Sixty-nine people died at Utøya. Fifty-six of them were under the age of 21 and the three youngest were only 14. All of them were there because they cared about their society and were ready to contribute; 15 of those who died at Utøya were candidates for municipal and provincial elections this September. Eight people lost their lives in the bomb explosion in Oslo. They were government workers and incidental passers-by. Scores were injured in both attacks, two dozen of them seriously. We can't know what the future looks like until we get there, but we always

have the choice of working to shape it. For us in the Labor Party, we know that we will carry the experience of July 22 with us always. And we owe it to those who died to continue on fighting for those ideals and values that they died fighting for, and serving. For them, and to remind us all of the world wide struggle that unites us, I repeat another quote that has been invoked by survivors of the shooting massacre:

“For our fallen comrades: not one minute’s silence, but a lifetime of struggle.” ■

Manning Marable 1950-2011

Manning Marable, a founding vice-chair of DSA, passed away in April from complications of pneumonia. He had suffered from the degenerative disease sarcoidosis for 25 years, and last year had undergone a double lung transplant.

Manning played a major role in the merger of our predecessor organizations, NAM and DSOC, into DSA. He was both a vice chair and a member of the National Executive Committee (later the NPC). For the first years of DSA he brought together a significant group of activists of color around his publication *Third World Socialist*, the publication of the DSA Anti-Racism, African-American, and Latino commissions. He put a lot of hard work into getting the various commissions off the ground, and hosted two DSA-related conferences of over 100 activists and academics of color in the mid-1980s.

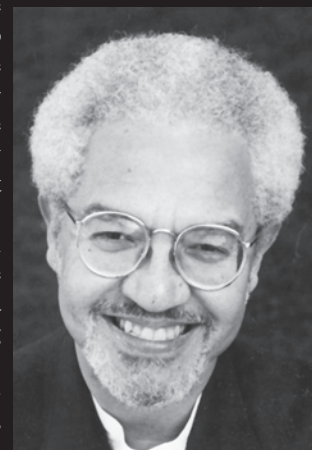
For various personal and political reasons, including some frustration that DSA’s anti-racist work did not grow significantly stronger over time, Manning shifted some of his political activism to the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism. Even so, he remained a warm and good friend of DSA; and an especially strong friend of the Youth Section (now YDS), speaking often at its summer and winter conferences.

Manning’s final work, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, is the definitive work on the life and work of that great Black revolutionary. He spent the last ten years of his life working with students, interns, and others to write the book, published just days after his death. The book is notable for its reinterpretation of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. As Marable explains, the 1964 and 1965 versions of the book presented Malcolm as he wanted to present himself, his preferred public persona as shaped and promoted by Alex Haley. The *Autobiography* became the primary script for Spike Lee’s important film on Malcolm’s life and the book and film have in turn been our primary sources for understanding Malcolm and his role in Black politics. Marable provides extensive evidence that Haley left out three important chapters in order to promote his own view of Malcolm.

Alex Haley was a moderate Republican whose first two articles on Malcolm were for the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Playboy*. While Malcolm spoke primarily to a Black audience about the Black experience, the Haley book proposal and negotiations were clearly directed toward a primarily white reading public.

Manning’s book extensively situates Malcolm’s life and struggles within the larger context of Black life and politics in the 1950s and 1960s. He describes in detail the role of the Nation of Islam in U.S. ghettos, violence and sexism in the Nation and in Malcolm’s personal life. He also describes significant transitions of Malcolm’s perspective from the Nation’s noxious brand of Islam to a more orthodox version of the faith as well as his later affinity for Pan-Africanism, a topic largely ignored in Haley’s work. Manning describes numerous additional important aspects of Malcolm’s relationship with the broader civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr., as well as his important exchanges with leftist organizations and individuals such as the Socialist Workers Party and Grace Lee Boggs. *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* allows us to see Malcolm both as he wanted to portray himself and in the historical context of subsequent developments in Black America.

Manning accomplished a tremendous amount in his 60 years, both politically and intellectually, and was that rare academic who never stopped being an active, political person. His work remains a major part of our heritage. He will be sorely missed by us as a movement and, by many DSA members personally. ■



Call to Convention

“Why We Want YOU to Attend the Convention in November”

Over the last two years DSA has continued renewing and revitalizing itself to meet the challenge of making the socialist tradition relevant to 21st century America. Membership has grown; new DSA locals and YDS chapters have been created; a new young national director has been selected. But never has the USA been in greater need of the contributions of democratic socialists to rebuilding the American Dream.

Neoliberal Republicans and Democrats trumpet the long-term budget deficit as the major threat to America’s future and hypocritically claim concern for future generations. In contrast, DSA argues that 30 years of neoliberal deregulation, de-unionization, privatization, and tax cuts for the rich have robbed the public sector of the revenues it needs to fund basic social services, including health care for the elderly and higher education for today’s youth. We face not a debt crisis, but a *jobs* crisis, and revenue shortages caused by coddling corporations and wasteful defense spending. As the super-wealthy get astronomically more so, increasing numbers of people slide from middle class to working class to poor. This economic inequality has triggered a huge shortfall in effective economic demand, and the only way to put masses of ordinary people back to work and spending their money in their communities is a public jobs program to rebuild our infrastructure and jump start a green economy.

In the words of Michael Moore, “America is not broke!” We can readily fund such a program, if we return income and corporate taxation to pre-Reagan levels and shift excessive defense spending to domestic needs.

But we all know that neither the moral imperative nor the correct analysis of our economic woes will cause politicians to enact the policies we need. A corporate-dominated political system will move in a progressive direction only if powerful democratic social movements force it to do so.

That’s where you come in. At the 2011 convention, DSA will:

- Empower you to offer an accessible, easy-to-understand analysis of the causes of, and remedies for, the economic crisis, whether in your local community or the blogosphere.

- Teach you organizing skills that will enable DSA locals and YDS chapters to fight the neoliberal program of slashing social insurance, higher education and anti-poverty programs.
- Provide a forum for you to meet other DSA and YDSers and learn from one another by sharing our ideas and best practices.
- Lay the groundwork for an effective socialist presence in movements that fight for the rights of working people, including immigrants and women; defend union rights; and fight for affordable higher education for all those who would benefit from it. Learn how to aid foreclosed-upon homeowners and the long-term unemployed by building movements for strict public regulation of finance and a massive public jobs program.

Red-baiting is the battering ram that corporate America wields when even the smallest democratic reforms threaten its power. DSA can blunt this weapon by building a visible socialist presence within grassroots democratic movements.

To that end, we urge members and friends to attend the DSA convention **Friday November 11th thru Sunday November 13th** just outside of Washington DC.

Convention Logistics:

TO VOTE – Delegates are selected by DSA local organizations. Members who do not live in an area with a DSA local may run as at-large delegates to the convention by notifying Maria Svart at msvart@dsausa.org or calling (212) 727-8610, and you will receive further convention information. YDSers are part of locals if there is one in their geographic vicinity; otherwise they are eligible to run as at-large delegates. Anyone with questions can contact Maria Svart for clarification.

COST–The convention fee is \$195, plus hotel room costs. Delegates are in a travel share.

LOCATION–The convention takes place at the Sheraton Premiere at Tysons Corner, 8661 Leesburg Pike. Vienna, VA 22182, (703) 448-1234. The hotel has a health club, pools and jacuzzi. The special DSA convention rate is \$109 (for a single or a double room) per night plus 11 percent tax. The room bloc will be held until October, but as the convention is scheduled for the Veterans Day weekend, we encourage you to make your reservations early.

NEAREST AIRPORT–Those flying to the convention should plan on flying into Dulles International Airport rather than into Reagan National Airport.

For further information please go to <http://dsausa.org/convention2011/convention.html> ■

Talking Union
DSA’s Labor Blog

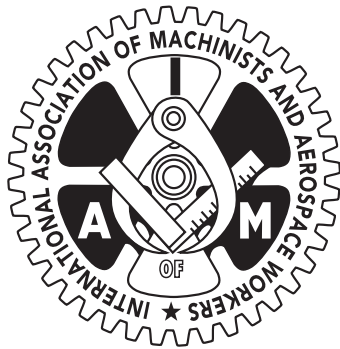
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Meet DSA's New National Director

By Michael Hirsch

“Taking this job was no career move,” Maria Svart admits in explaining why she traded in her decently paying and frequently rewarding negotiator’s job with a healthcare union to herd cats for DSA and set herself up as a target for every far-right Internet loon who can type.

“It wasn’t a case of ‘somebody’s got to do it,’ and there was no shortage of good candidates,” the 31-year-old incoming DSA national director said, when asked about the switch that makes her the national face of the organized democratic left in America and responsible for the daily work of the largest socialist group in the United States. She says she slipped off the professional career ladder to come on board “maybe because of Catholic guilt absorbed from my extended family but more because we’re in a moment politically and organizationally where my organizing skills can be useful.”

Svart is no stranger to DSA. A member of the Young Democratic Socialists at the University of Chicago, where she was a scholarship student, she became active in the DSA youth group on the national level as its feminist issues coordinator.

“My job there was to pay attention to feminist and queer issues, and create resources and materials and ensure there was a socialist-feminist analysis in all our YDS work,” explained.

She also served several terms as YDS co-chair, and then led the New York City DSA local before succeeding veteran national director Frank Llewellyn, who retired in July.

The new national director was no “red diaper baby,” she avers, no prefabricated product of leftist parents, though she took to heart her mother’s stories of growing up Chicana in a racially charged Southwest mining community and of her own experience passing for white as a child of mixed racial parentage.

“I have my father’s blue eyes and pale skin [her dad is of northern European extraction] and I share the identity and experience of many biracial people who pass and have white privilege and of being around people making racist comments in front of me and assuming I’ll agree with them. There are still a lot of people who are uncomfortable being racist to somebody’s face but quite comfortable about it ‘among themselves,’” she says.

This experience is one reason why she doesn’t dismiss identity politics in toto and defends the notion of “working with people from where they’re at,” which she takes to mean “treating people’s frames of reference seriously and working in common with people in motion. This is organizing,” she says, “and it’s the best way to expose more folks to our politics.”

A firm believer in Crystal Eastman’s aphorism that “life is a big battle for the complete feminist,” she also knows

that class exploitation, racial oppression and capital as a system need confronting, too.

So no cartoon class, race or gender reductionist she, Svart insists what needs understanding is “how and where different structures of oppression intersect. We can learn from identity politics that capitalism as a system is one form of oppression, though I also don’t think the

oppressions are co-equal. And of course class is critical. That’s why we’re socialists.”

Since coming on staff, she’s hit the ground running, organizing November’s DSA convention as a working meeting on reversing the nation’s growing inequalities of wealth and corporate attacks on working people. Other immediate goals include beefing up fundraising efforts, including recognizing funders for their support, and celebrating the 50th anniversary of the publication of DSA founder Michael Harrington’s epochal look at poverty, *The Other America*.

Longer term, Svart sees her goal not so much as office manager cum membership secretary and servicer for locals’ needs – all things she readily admits need doing well – but as national organizer. “Locals need help in recruiting members and also in integrating them and developing new leaders of our work,” she said.

Acknowledging that locals could use their own discrete full or part-time paid organizers, too, she doesn’t see that happening in the short run unless locals can afford to do so, which means fund raising locally.

Svart also wants to recruit women to be more involved in DSA’s national leadership, something she intends to promote.

And despite her background as a unionist, she doesn’t envision the typical YDS graduate doing DSA work as a “salt” or a worker in a nonunion shop or industry trying to organize coworkers, at least any more than they ought to be academics or political writers or poets or artisans or itinerant activists. “We should have all of them,” she thinks. “When I talk about the labor movement, it’s very important that progressive people become rank and file members of their unions, rather than staffers,” she said.

So, a full plate? “Sure, but who said making social change was supposed to be easy,” Svart said. ■



Maria Svart

Continued from page 16

Metropolitan Atlanta DSA organized a May Day weekend celebration that featured Chicago DSAers Peg Strobel and Bill Barclay speaking on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and what to do about the jobs crisis, respectively. Students, community activists and labor organizers presented snapshots of local struggles that were the focus of community efforts to defend workers' rights including work in support of Sodexo food services workers at Emory University, local Teamsters organizing campaigns and efforts to organize Delta Airline workers as well as campaigns with public employees who lack collective bargaining rights.

In April, seven students from Emory and two from other universities (including a new DSA member) were arrested while protesting Emory's Sodexo contract. More than 200 faculty members responded by signing a petition demanding the charges be dropped. Metro Atlanta DSA has been supporting the Sodexo workers and their student allies for more than a year and continues to turn out members at campaign rallies and forums.

In **Chicago DSA** members joined hundreds of activists and members of UNITE HERE Local 1 at a rally to mark the 8th anniversary of the start of the strike against the Congress Plaza Hotel. Like DSA groups in Detroit and New York, Chicago DSA participates in actions on the first Friday of every month to protest the jobs crisis and demand government action on job creation.

For 36 consecutive days, the Indiana AFL-CIO led protests against efforts to impose right-to-work legislation

as well as a laundry list of right-wing legislation. **Central Indiana DSA** joined in the demonstrations and supported progressive legislators when they fled the state to block anti-worker legislation. "Right to Work" legislation was pushed back but far too many right-wing bills and budget cuts were passed. DSAers participated in a symbolic shredding of the bills at the end of the legislative session.

In **Michigan**, many localities tried to privatize the non-educational school staff. In Farmington, DSA members attended rallies and provided valuable support to a Michigan Education Association led campaign that blocked the effort although the anti-union campaign succeeded elsewhere in the state.

In **California, Sacramento DSA** worked with the Sacramento Faculty Association (SEIU & NEA) in the lead up to the April 13 Day of Action in which demonstrations against tuition increases and budget cuts occurred on all 23 of the state university campuses. Sacramento DSA also participated in the California State of Emergency demonstrations at the capitol that resulted in the arrest of many union activists.

Wichita DSA's monthly forum often focuses on a labor topic. In March, the local cooperated with the YDS chapter at Wichita State University to organize a screening of "The Dark side of Chocolate," a documentary film about the "Raise the Bar, Hershey" campaign to force chocolate manufacturers to end exploitative child labor in the cocoa fields. In June, they focused on the Showdown in Ohio protest led by National People's Action in May. ■

In grateful appreciation to those members and friends that supported the campaign for *Democratic Left*:

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DSA Locals on Labor's Front Lines

When the public thinks about the attacks on working people and their institutions most likely the attempts in Ohio and Wisconsin to strip public sector employees of the right to collective bargaining come to mind. But the reality is that the working people and unions are under the gun all over the country. You only have to look at DSA locals' and YDS chapters' work in support of workers to see the magnitude of the struggle.

DSA locals often work in the same or similar local coalitions. Some are single-issue groups while others are more permanent multi-issue groups. DSA groups in Atlanta, Boston, Central Indiana, Chicago, Columbus, Oh and Detroit are involved in Jobs with Justice coalition projects. Many locals are working with the Hotel Workers Rising campaign sponsored by UNITE HERE. Locals are also involved in coalitions focused on Wal-Mart's treatments of workers such as "Greater Boston Wants Good Jobs." Immigrants' rights, living wage and budget cut coalitions are also a staple of DSA local work. The pages of local DSA publications or

in the case of Ithaca DSA its community access television program always feature local labor issues. As we went to press locals began reporting on their plans to participate in the September actions organized by the nurses that focus on Wall St and call for a financial transactions tax.

Not every issue was a direct assault on the right to collective bargaining. Many times efforts involved helping workers organize a union, reach an agreement with a recalcitrant employer, change the political climate, demand action on jobs or remember the long history of the struggle for labor rights. There is so much going on at the local level that we cannot list everything that we would like to but this summary provides representative highlights of the work of our local groups.

Alaska DSA in Fairbanks has been working with the Central Labor Council to support progressive candidates for their local Borough Assembly, which presently has a five-to-four "Tea Party" majority on labor issues.

Continued on page 15

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