


**DEMOCRATIC LEFT**

Vol. XLII, No. 1, Summer 2014 



[www.dsusa.org](http://www.dsusa.org)

# Inequality: Pernicious Problem, Political Solutions



*the magazine of the Democratic Socialists of America*

# Working Smart in the Class Struggle

By Maria Svart

When billionaires claim, as investor Sam Zell has, that “The 1% work harder,” I can only respond, “Why yes, you *are* working harder than the rest of us in the class struggle. Of course we are envious of your wealth—you stole it from us!”



Make no mistake: over the last 40 years, a small group of people has gained much at the expense of almost everyone else. The right wing governs “top to bottom” in almost half of the states and seems poised to extend that dominance at the federal level. They have rigged the game, and the only way for our side to win is to organize.

But understanding economic injustice isn’t enough. Conditions for protest have changed. There is no such thing as “work-life balance.” Most people are perpetually anxious about meeting their boss’s demands to work longer and faster. They wonder how they will make the rent, whether they should pay down their debt or start a family, whether one illness will wipe them out. Folks know they are getting the short end of the stick, but it seems that action is useless.

There are two main reasons for this. The first was articulated by Margaret Thatcher, who claimed that “there is no alternative.” We cannot underestimate the sense of futility, particularly among young people, that is created when popular mobilizations (most recently, Occupy Wall Street) fail to create immediately visible changes in public policy around finance capital. When collective action seems to have no effect, people retreat to individualistic explanations and solutions. This makes movement building difficult.

Second, now that the effects of de-unionization and declining real wages are being felt by more (white,

“middle class”) people, the right wing has ramped up racial scapegoating to fan fears of a black or brown parasitic “other” sucking the hard-earned cash away from virtuous (white) “middle class” people. This divisiveness, which has a long and dishonorable history, also makes movement building difficult.

Yes, there is a class struggle. And, at the moment, we are not winning it. We understand the systemic nature of our economic problems, and history shows us that in this country movements arise when people can feel some hope. We know that racism has been used since colonial times to keep us from uniting against a common opponent, and it is being used blatantly again. This does not mean that we will retreat to our couches and order an escapist movie. It means that we will redouble our efforts, but do so more thoughtfully.

And that’s what our chapters are doing. Atlanta DSAers helped build the Georgia Moral Mondays movement. Several members were arrested in the state capitol while demanding that the governor expand Medicaid. At the same time, the chapter organizes “socialist education circles” for political discussion and engages in solidarity work around a staggering list of issues. Sacramento, Seattle, and other DSA chapters joined the “Fight for 15” minimum wage campaign with other socialists and labor activists, and Philadelphia DSA assisted Temple University YDS in a campaign against the politically motivated firing of a prominent African American studies professor and activist. Local chapters across the country participated in the National Network of Abortion Funds bowl-athons in April, raising money to help low-income women gain access to safe abortions. Putting the “social” into socialist, many chapters organize happy hours to build community and welcome new members. We combine organizing and education to build the kind of community we want to see everywhere—and the kind of cooperation it will take to win.

One-percenters like Sam Zell work hard in their offensive against the 99%. We have to work harder and smarter. ❖

## Contents

Inequality .....	3
Valuing Women’s Work .....	6
School Reform Adds to Inequality .....	7
Changing the Conversation: Poverty .....	8
Rosa Luxemburg .....	9
Summer Reads for Reds .....	12
Class Classics: <i>Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists</i> .....	14
From Occupy Davis to Democratic Socialism .....	15
The Activist’s Guide to Using DSA Literature .....	15

Cover art by Frank Reynoso

### Talking about DL:

If you would like to participate in a discussion of this issue—and other issues—of *Democratic Left*, please email [info@dsausa.org](mailto:info@dsausa.org) or call 212-727-8610 to join a phone discussion group.

# Inequality

## Political Origins, Political Solutions

By Joseph M. Schwartz

Nearly 40 years of bipartisan policies of the “4 Ds” of neoliberalism—deregulation, decrease in union strength, defunding of public goods, and decreases in taxes on the rich and corporations—have produced inequalities in income and wealth that rival those of the Gilded Age. The main task for the left over the next period is to build social movements capable of altering these policies. In our organizing, we must show that inequality is not foreordained. It has been the conscious political project of the corporate elite, and it can be reversed politically.

In 1973, the top 1% of income earners garnered 8.5% of total income. Today, they take in 23% (much of it from dividends and interest). The figures for wealth distribution are even more striking, with the top 1% of Americans controlling 38% of non-housing wealth and the top 10% some 80%. The bottom half of the adult population has zero wealth, and many are seriously in debt.

About 25% of U.S. jobs do not pay wages sufficient to lift a family of four out of poverty (an annual income of \$23,000 or \$12 an hour). During the past decade, 40% of U.S. families have spent at least a year living below the poverty line.

The post-Second World War landscape was not one of racial and class equality, but from 1947 to 1973, living standards improved for millions of working-class families, and the civil rights struggle enabled millions of African Americans and Latinos to escape a previously segregated labor market. During that period, in part because nearly 30% of the working population belonged to unions, family income kept pace with the gross domestic product.

As the GDP rose 95%, median family income rose 93% as well. In contrast, from 1979 to 2010, a period when union density in the private sector fell from 20% to 6.5%, GDP and productivity rose 80%, but median family income rose only 17%. Even this paltry rise only came about because of the massive entry of women into the labor market and the rise of two-income-earning households. In fact, 80% of income gains in this period went to the

top 20% of income earners.

What accounts for the shift from the “Great Compression” of 1947-1973 to the “Great Divergence” of 1973 onward? Neoliberal pundits such as Thomas Friedman and David Brooks would have us believe that globalization and technological change brought inordinately high returns to those with education and technical skills. They ignore the role that decades of zealous neoliberal economic policies played in causing radical inequality.

This “skills-based technological change” thesis remains the predominant neoliberal explanation for the rise in inequality. If the thesis were correct, wages for scarce college-level skills would have increased significantly, and there would be too few applicants for higher skilled jobs. But neither is the case. In fact,

wages for college graduates have largely been stagnant over the past decade. It is true that the 4% of jobs that demand high-level STEM (science, technology, engineering, math)

skills do pay better, but

there simply are not enough good jobs to go around. The continued “premium” for college education persists only because

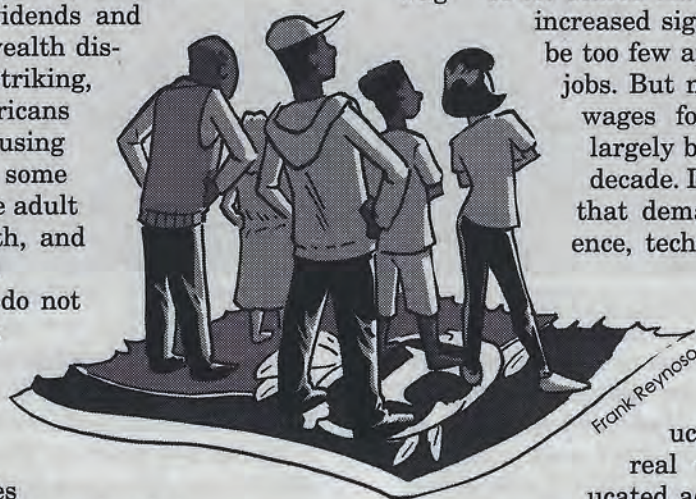
real wages for non-college-educated adults have fallen 12% over the past decade, while wages of the college educated have been flat.

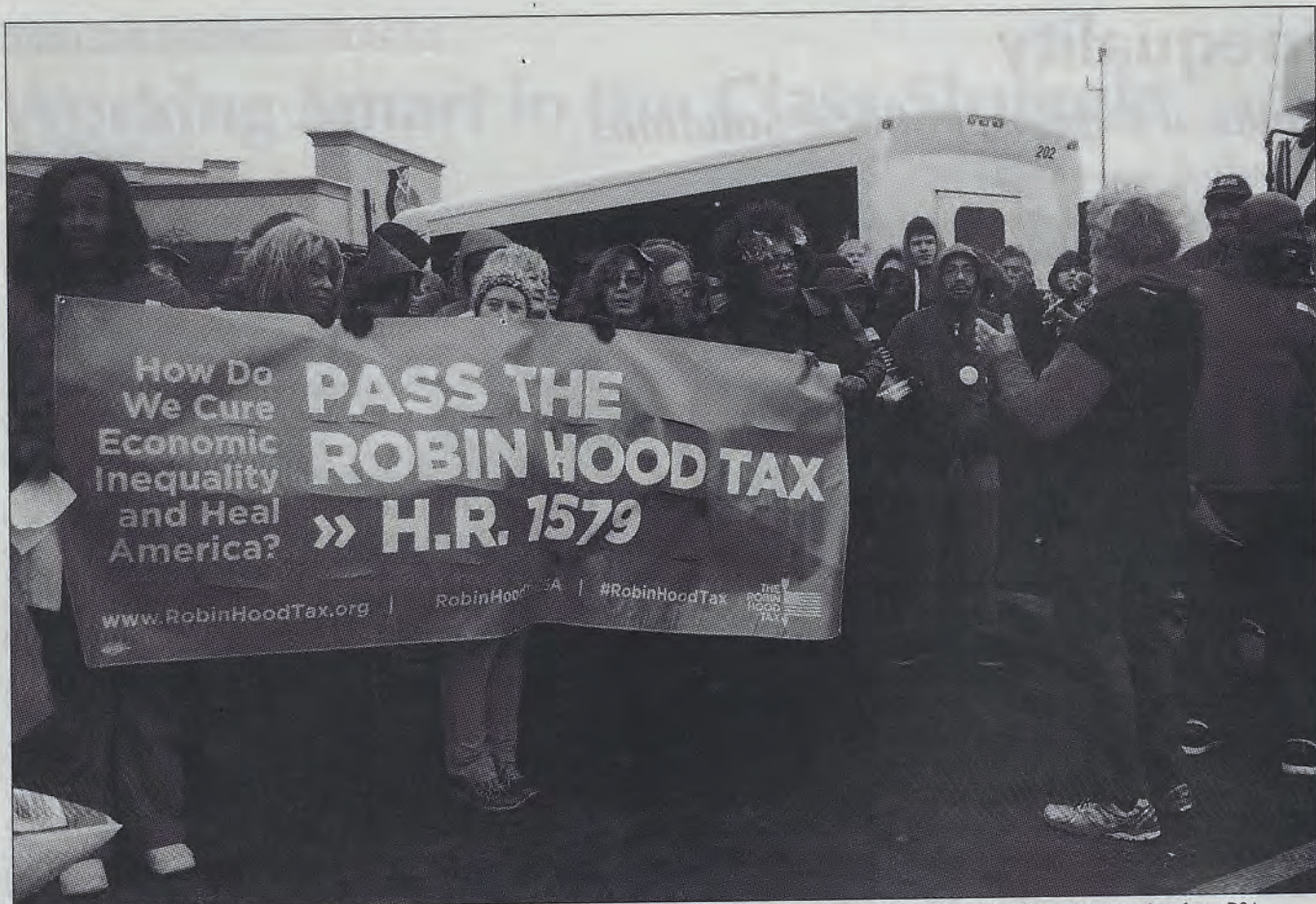
What’s the real cause of rising inequality? Billionaire investor Warren Buffett speaks the truth: it was the class warfare carried out by his class against the working class.

### Deregulation

Government economic deregulation contributed to this upward shift, starting in the 1970s. Democratic Party supporters thought that deregulation of trucking, airlines, finance, and telecommunications would benefit consumers. They failed to see that it would lead to concentration in industries and that industry would take advantage of the abolition of state-mediated labor relations to destroy unions and unionized jobs, mostly in industries not subject to international competition.

Today, telecommunications, airlines, and trucking represent major growth areas for “temporary” work-





Chicago DSA member Bill Barclay (back to camera) speaks in support of a Robin Hood Tax on some financial transactions to supporters from DSA, National Nurses United, Progressive Democrats of America, National People's Action, and other groups.

ers and “independent contractors.” These workers neither receive benefits nor are they subject to government labor regulations. “Independent contractors” now constitute over 25% of the work force (up from 8% in the 1970s). These are not just temporary jobs at times of peak labor demand. “Temp” is the new permanent.

### De-unionization

At the same time that deregulation caused the loss of good union jobs, both the state and corporate America carried out a massive attack on the right of workers to bargain collectively. Ronald Reagan’s 1981 firing of 10,000 striking air traffic controllers led to the breaking of numerous private-sector strikes in the 1980s with permanent replacement workers (formerly known as “scabs”). This terror in the workplace contributed to union density in the private sector falling from 20% in 1980 to 6.5% today. Timothy Noah estimates in *The Great Divergence* that 25% of the increase in inequality is due to de-unionization, often of jobs that cannot be outsourced, such as construction.

In addition, the failure to index the minimum wage to inflation and to gains in worker productivity has placed downward pressure on all wages. If

the minimum wage had kept pace with inflation, it would be \$10.70 today. If it had risen along with the 80% growth in productivity since 1979, it would be a robust \$20 an hour. This is why the fight to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour is so crucial to the fight against inequality. Such a raise, most liberal economists estimate, would yield only a 2% increase in retail sales prices.

### Defunding

But we need more than high wages to combat inequality. Sustaining a strong social wage—that is, a guaranteed minimum income along with universal provision of those goods necessary for equality—is the only way to decrease rampant inequality. For this, we need a strong labor movement and strong left. Even a family making the median family income of \$50,000 cannot live well absent equitably financed, high quality public education, single-payer healthcare, universal childcare, and paid parental leave. Yet public services have been slashed at every point, from libraries and schools to hospitals and Head Start. The more robust level of public provision in Northern Europe is the major reason why these societies have more egalitarian distributions of income, much lower poverty rates, and higher

rates of social mobility than does the United States.

### Decreased Taxes

The final major cause of the increase in inequality has been a shift to even more pro-corporate tax and trade policy and a decrease in the overall tax revenue taken in by federal, state and local governments. Each of the Reagan and George W. Bush (2000-2008) tax cuts took 2.1% of the gross national product (GNP) out of the federal coffers, with 80% of those tax breaks going to the top 10%. The Clinton administration lowered the capital gains tax to 15% and decreased the estate tax. Paul Pierson and Jacob Hacker in *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*, estimate that these regressive changes in tax policy caused 25% of the upward redistribution from the 1980s onward.

The Clinton administration's abolition in 1999 of the Glass-Steagall Act's legal separation of commercial from finance banking codified the ongoing deregulation of the financial industry that gave us successive boom-and-bust financial bubbles. We've had the merger-and-acquisition bubble, the high-tech stock bubble, the housing bubble. Is the higher-education-debt bubble next?

In addition, "free trade agreements" such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Central American Free Trade Agreement have contributed to a "race to the bottom" global economy that has outsourced industrial jobs to producers with the lowest wage, labor, environmental, and human rights standards. The absence of any industrial and job training policy in the United States has led to the loss of many otherwise viable industrial jobs. For example, 70% of wind turbines used in the United States are made in Germany and China, and 25% of our industrial imports come from Japan and Europe. Fiscal austerity in the United States leads us to radically under-invest in infrastructure renewal

and precludes necessary public investment in alternative energy and mass transit.

Moderate Democratic and Republican claims that "the government is broke" are disproven by the reality that the Reagan and George W. Bush tax cuts combined today deny the federal budget \$800 billion of annual tax revenue. A financial transaction tax of 0.25% (popularly called the Robin Hood tax) would not only dampen speculation, but could also raise \$400 billion annually for the federal government.

Reversing tax cuts and going back to private and corporate tax rates of the 1970s, combined with prudent cuts in wasteful "defense," and eliminating \$200 billion in corporate tax giveaways would enable us to radically increase spending on public goods and public investment.

Reversing radical inequality will require a radical shift in class power. We need to take on the slow and steady work of rebuilding powerful social movements for economic justice: immigrant rights, voting rights, labor rights, and publicly financed election campaigns. The left must also develop a popular critique of the dominant neoliberal "common sense" that "there is no alternative" to an unjust and non-egalitarian world. It is in the interest of the powerful to convince the majority that the forces of globalization and technological change are "natural" rather than shaped by political conflict. This is why rebuilding a socialist center in the United States remains a crucial task for those committed to social justice. DSAers must work to build mass democratic social movements; but we must also articulate an alternative "good sense" as to how and why a better world is not only possible but feasible.

*Joseph M. Schwartz is a professor of political science at Temple University and a national vice chair of DSA. He is the author of The Permanence of the Political and of The Future of Democratic Equality.*

## Democratic Left

(ISSN 1643207) is published quarterly at 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 702, New York, NY 10038. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY (Publication No. 701-960). Subscriptions: \$10 regular; \$15 institutional. Postmaster: Send address changes to 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 702, New York, NY 10038. Democratic Left is published by the Democratic Socialists of America, 75 Maiden Lane, Suite 702, New York, NY 10038. (212) 727-8610. Signed articles express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of the organization.

**Executive Editor:** Maria Svart

**Editor:** Maxine Phillips

**Blog Editors:** Duane Campbell and Barbara Joye

**Editorial Committee:** Michael Baker, Elizabeth Henderson, Amber Frost, Michael Hirsch, Barbara Joye

**Editorial Advisory Committee:** Duane Campbell, Jeffrey Gold, Frank Llewellyn,

Simone Morgen, Mark Schaeffer, Jason Schulman, Joseph Schwartz

**Founding Editor:** Michael Harrington (1928-1989)

**Production:** Ed Hedemann

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.

# Valuing Women's Work

By Natalie K. Midiri

To say that poverty is a women's issue is an understatement. Nearly 25% of full-time jobs in America do not pay well enough to lift a family out of poverty, and 66% of those jobs are done primarily by women. In addition, the changing nature of work and increased categorization of workers as temporary or independent contractors hits women hard. Women in low-wage work are disproportionately adult women of color who are caring for children without aid from a partner. Very few have paid sick days, any sort of retirement plan, or even consistent workplace safety regulation.

Let us look at home-based childcare providers, for example, although we could as easily look at home health aides or house cleaners. In one of its few positive outcomes, Bill Clinton's destruction of "welfare as we know it" greatly expanded publicly subsidized home-based childcare. This expansion provided jobs for poor women in their own neighborhoods, where they could be home with their own children while caring for those of their neighbors.

This might have been a positive way for some women to strike a balance between working and caring for their children, except that 50% of the caregivers in the child care industry receive poverty-level wages, making childcare the industry with the most workers earning wages below the poverty line in the United States. It is no accident that the work force is 95% female. In New York City, for example, the women who do this work typically average about \$9 an hour, compared with \$15 for preschool teachers and \$30 for kindergarten teachers in similar neighborhoods. Salaries are even lower in other areas, such as Oregon, where home-based caregivers can make as little as \$2.35 per hour per child (with a legal maximum of three children), and I speak here only of state-sponsored care, not unregulated, informal arrangements.

What keeps these women's wages so low? One problem is that across the country most women who provide home-based childcare are classified as independent contractors, even though their wages are paid by the state. Thus, they are not protected by the minimum wage, are not entitled to paid time off, and have little long-term job security. They receive the market rate in their communities, which keeps their

wages artificially low, because most people living in poverty live in poor neighborhoods and do not have the benefit of wealthier families around to raise the market rate.

Childcare providers are not the only women participating in the formal economy without such basic protections as the minimum wage. Eldercare providers as well as house cleaners can be legally classified as independent contractors, too, and many employers, especially in industries like home health care, illegally misclassify women as independent contractors to avoid responsibility for worker's compensation, unemployment insurance, overtime, health care coverage, and vacation time. This lack of protection dates to the New Deal, which provided some workers with protections, but exempted much "women's work" because southern legislators did not want to

lose the low-wage workers in their homes and fields.

The precarious nature of low-wage work means that thousands of call-center operators, receptionists, substitute teachers, teachers' aides, and health-care workers lose additional wages every time they must take a day off from work to care for children too sick for daycare.

Small inroads have been made, especially in publicizing the issues, as home-based care providers are increasingly joining existing teachers' unions, as in New York, where 12,000 caregivers are now represented by the United Federation of Teachers. It is time to go beyond the New Deal or the War on Poverty of the last century. Our existing approach to labor regulation relies too heavily on notions of standard full-time employment, leaving entire categories of workers engaged in part-time work, temp work, and independent contracting, let alone work in the informal economy, without the very basic benefits typically associated with work. All workers are at risk, but women will continue to be those most vulnerable to poverty as long as we fail to protect "women's work." ❖

*Natalie K. Midiri runs a preschool co-op in Collingswood, N.J., and is an active member of Greater Philadelphia DSA.*



“It is time to go beyond the New Deal or the War on Poverty of the last century.”

# School “Reform” Adds to Inequality

By Mike Rose

“There is no joy at our school,” the teacher tells me, “only admonishment.” She’s taught for 30 years at a school in a lower-middle-class community north of Los Angeles, and she pours out her story with urgency and exasperation.

Her school’s standardized test scores were not adequate last year, so her principal, under immense pressure from the district, mandated a “scripted” curriculum, that is, a regimented course of study focused on basic math and literacy skills that must be followed by all teachers. The principal also directed the teachers not to change or augment this curriculum, so the teacher cannot draw on her cabinets full of materials collected over the years to enliven, extend, or individualize instruction. The principal has directed his staff to increase the time spent on literacy and math and to trim back on science and social studies. Art and music have been cut entirely.

The readers of this article are aware of inequality in education, of unequal funding, of resegregation, of the threats to social services that affect schooling. Here, I want to address another kind of educational inequality, one we hear less about but that matters immensely and is reflected in the opening vignette—inequality in the very experience of education, what it feels like to be in school.

Inequality in funding and resources certainly can have an effect on students’ experience of school: the ratio of students to teachers; the number and quality of books, science artifacts, and instructional materials; the condition of the physical plant. A number of low-income schools are in bad shape, and their students suffer for it. But the sad thing is that many of the school reform policies meant to improve the lot of low-income children contribute to a diminishment of the experience of schooling as well.

Our veteran teacher describes the aftermath of the kinds of high-stakes standardized testing mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act and continued under Race to the Top. In many low-income schools, the curriculum is narrowed, teachers are under pressure to teach to the test, pedagogy is directed and routinized. It is true that some low-performing schools have been jolted to evaluate and redirect their inadequate curricula. The result has been a bump in test scores, but at what cost? The key issue is how teachers and administrators accomplish this revision: through a strictly functional and unimaginative curriculum or through a rich course of study that, as a by-product, affects test scores.



“...and is it true that you never once administered a single standardized test?”

Students may get, on average, a few more items right on a reading or math test but not develop an appreciation of reading or a sense of how mathematics works. The end result is the replication, in the name of reform, of a troubling pattern in American schooling: poor kids get an education of skills and routine, a lower-tier education, while students in more affluent districts get a robust course of study.

Over the years, I have visited classrooms in low-income urban and rural communities where gifted teachers, typically relying heavily on their own money and networks, create remarkable environments for young people. To be sure, math and reading are hugely important in these classrooms. They are foundational skills. But students are exposed to so much else, for these teachers don’t see the mastery of basic skills and immersion in the arts and sciences as an either-or proposition.

These teachers try to create for their students the kind of education found in more affluent schools, the kind of education too few poor kids receive, even after 12 years of school reform—and sometimes because of it. Our teacher is right. Too much of current reform is built on a philosophy of compliance and regulation, test scores and metrics. You won’t hear talk of curiosity, reflection, imagination, aesthetics, or a willingness to take a chance. Inequality involves money and resources, but it also involves the quality of a young person’s experience in the classroom. ❖

*Mike Rose is on the faculty of the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and is the author of Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us (revised 2014) and The Mind at Work: Valuing the Education of the American Worker. Visit him at [mikeroosebooks.com](http://mikeroosebooks.com).*

# Making Poverty Visible

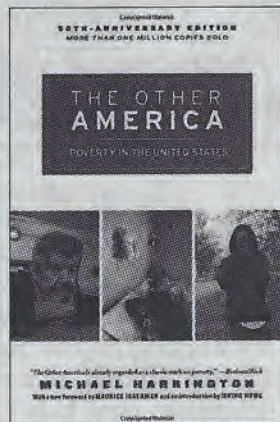
By Maurice Isserman

*Frederick Douglass famously said that without struggle there is no progress. Our activist forbears changed political climates and conversations. In this occasional column, Democratic Left looks at the work of those earlier generations of radicals in the hope that these analyses will spark discussions of how the conversation can be changed again.*

Fifty years ago, in January of 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty” in his State of the Union address. Eight months later, Congress passed antipoverty legislation launching that effort. Four years earlier, in the presidential election, poverty had not been mentioned as an issue by either John F. Kennedy or Richard Nixon. Many Americans assumed that there were no poor people in America, outside, perhaps, of isolated “pockets of poverty” like Appalachia. What changed the conversation?

The short answer is DSA founder Michael Harrington’s book *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, published in March 1962 and given a laudatory review by Dwight Macdonald in the January 19, 1963, *New Yorker*. When the book appeared, Harrington expected it to sell about 2,500 copies. Instead, it sold 70,000 in hardcover within its first year, and more than a million in paperback since. Macdonald’s review presumably brought it to the attention of John F. Kennedy. By February 1964, when Harrington was summoned to Washington by Johnson aide Sargent Shriver to discuss proposed antipoverty legislation, *Business Week* noted, “*The Other America* is already regarded as a classic work on poverty.” The book argued that poverty in America was both more *extensive* and *tenacious* than most Americans assumed. “That the poor are invisible is one of the most important things about them,” Harrington wrote. “They are not simply neglected and forgotten as in the old rhetoric of reform; what is much worse, they are not seen.”

*The Other America* had a dramatic impact on public perception and official policy, and the resulting war on poverty, despite a half-century of dispar-



agement by conservatives, had a dramatic impact on the problem of poverty, with the percentage of poor Americans declining from 22.4% in 1960 to 12.1% in 1969 (a number that likely would have fallen even further had not Johnson’s attention, and billions of dollars of federal spending, been diverted to the disaster of the Vietnam War).

But to say that the conversation about poverty changed because Harrington published his book is too short an answer. If the book had appeared five years earlier, as Harrington often observed, it would have had little impact. For by 1962 the conversation was already changing, thanks to the work of poor people, of young people, of labor and civil rights organizers, clergy and laity, artists, and others.

First and foremost among the conversation changers was the civil rights movement—remembered today as a movement devoted to establishing equality before the law and ending racial injustice. But it was also a movement on behalf of poor people. From his seminary days, Martin Luther King, Jr. grappled with the issue of economic injustice, and thought and spoke of himself, at least in small circles of close associates, as a democratic socialist. A. Philip Randolph, labor leader and socialist, led the 1963 March on Washington—a march for “Jobs and Freedom” (emphasis added), which was organized by socialist Bayard Rustin.

Left-wing unions, such as New York’s Local 1199, began in the late 1950s to organize some of the city’s poorest-paid workers, the black and Puerto Rican employees of the big voluntary hospitals, building a powerful and durable movement committed to social change. Left-wing artist Leonard Bernstein, who would march with King on Selma in 1965, drew public attention to the problem of urban poverty through the Tony-Award winning 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story*, which was released as a popular movie in 1961.

The conversation of poverty changed in the 1960s because Michael Harrington wrote a book—and because, for at least a half-decade beforehand, Americans were being prepared to hear and respond to its message. ❖

Maurice Isserman, a founding member of DSA, is the author of *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington*, and the foreword to the 50th Anniversary edition of *The Other America*.





# Rosa Luxemburg for Today

By Nichole M. Shippen

Rosa Luxemburg, a heroic and principled figure of the left, died in 1919 at the hands of the right-wing German Social Democratic Party (SPD) leadership's militarist *Freikorps* (Volunteer Corps) allies. When they murdered her and her comrade Karl Leibknecht and threw their bodies into Berlin's Landwehr Canal, they made Luxemburg a martyr for the socialist workers' movement. A Polish-German secular Jew, a Marxist political economist and theorist, Luxemburg was a prominent leader of the left wing of the SPD, founder of the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, and, later, of the Spartacus League and the German Communist Party.

Luxemburg lived and wrote during the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution and was witness to historical conditions ripe for actively rethinking socialist theory and practice. The episodic resurrection of Luxemburg's political thought continues to inflame the political imagination of socialists committed to belief in the democratic possibilities of mass resistance and faith in the long-run capacity of the working class to rebel against capitalism, as demonstrated in her theory of spontaneity. Today, the protests in Tahrir Square, of the *indignados* in Spain, of Turkish activists in Gezi Park, the *piqueteros* in Argentina, the SYRIZA Party in Greece, Occupy Wall Street, and many other forms of popular resistance indicate that Luxemburg could appeal to yet another generation. She, too, grappled with what socialist parties and activists should and could do in relation to such protests.

*Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*, edited by Democratic Left advisory board member Jason Schulman, underscores Luxemburg's major contributions to socialism during the years of the Second (Socialist) International and her relevance for contemporary socialist thought. The original impetus behind this project came from Stephen Eric Bronner's essay "Red Dreams and the New Millennium: Notes on the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg," published in the socialist journal *New Politics* in 2001. Bronner's article sparked a debate among *New Politics* writers over the proper interpretation of Luxemburg's ideas for current socialist politics in light of new historic conditions.

Schulman brings together the *New Politics* debate with new essays on Luxemburg that offer reflections on political events that have transpired since 2001, including popular resistance to austerity measures

## BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

*Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy*  
Edited by Jason Schulman  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 214 pp.

*The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg:  
Volume I: Economic Writings 1*  
Edited by Peter Hudis  
Verso, 2013, 596 pp.

*Red Rosa*  
Conceived and illustrated by Kate Evans  
and edited by Paul Buhle  
Forthcoming, Verso, 2015

both here and abroad. Among the new contributors are DSA activists (and *DL* writers) Amber Frost, Chris Maisano, and Michael Hirsch. The inter-generational approach of this collection reads as if one were listening to the debate in real time. Almost a hundred years after her death, Luxemburg still courts controversy.

Below, I highlight a few points from the DSA contingent because they demonstrate Luxemburg's steadfast commitments to radical democracy and internationalism. The only potential weakness of the book is the lack of attention to Luxemburg's contributions regarding the conditions of women, of which more later.

The primary contention in the original debate among Bronner, Alan Johnson, and David Camfield is over the "meaning of socialism under modern conditions." Bronner argues, "Whatever else the term [socialism] might imply, it must initially be understood as a practice intent upon mitigating the whip of the market *through* the state and abolishing the exercise of arbitrary power *by* the state." Bronner points to Luxemburg's recognition of the necessity of translating economic reform into political demands, including the ultimate goal of revolution. In this regard, she is famous for her debates with Eduard Bernstein against his argument for "evolutionary socialism," or the idea that socialism will gradually evolve out of economic reform. Today, the call for democratic socialism, Bronner argues, is "predicated on little more than an ethical commitment." In general, Johnson and Camfield argue with Bronner over points of interpretation of Luxemburg as well as current political-economic conditions.

Frost, a self-proclaimed activist and non-academic, argues that the participants in this debate are “indulging in Freud’s ‘narcissism of minor differences,’ and subsequently side-stepping more productive debate.” She criticizes other contributors for their “lack of faith in the resilience of Marxism in the face of detractors and assaults,” and takes Michael Thompson, especially, to task for his expressed doubts about the political effectiveness of workers’ councils. In the spirit of Luxemburg’s undying commitment to democracy for the masses, in contrast to Lenin’s supposed notion of the revolutionary vanguard party implanting revolutionary consciousness into the proletariat, Frost defends the democratic potential of workers’ councils by considering ways that the model might be improved and developed as an indispensable organizational form of political education.

In “Where Do We Go from Here? Rosa Luxemburg and the Crisis of Democratic Capitalism,” Maisano frames his essay around the tension between capitalism and democracy. Echoing Luxemburg’s international commitment, Maisano’s analysis of popular movements extends beyond the United States in his discussion of the political context in Greece, Italy, Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Maisano argues that the appeal of popular movements rests in their democratic nature and offers an explanation as to why “these movements have tended to reject parties, representation, and the state *in toto*”:

People today have very little control over anything that happens in their lives. They feel like playthings of powerful forces that are not subject to even a modicum of democratic accountability or control. This is what accounts for the relentless focus of movements like Occupy on process and consensus.

Maisano summarizes the debates in the book as revolving around two conflicting approaches, with

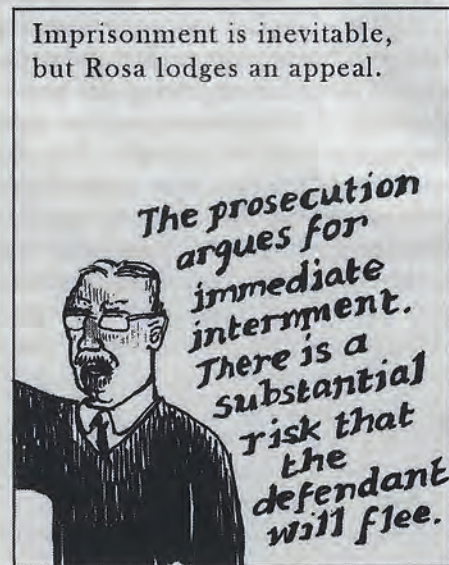
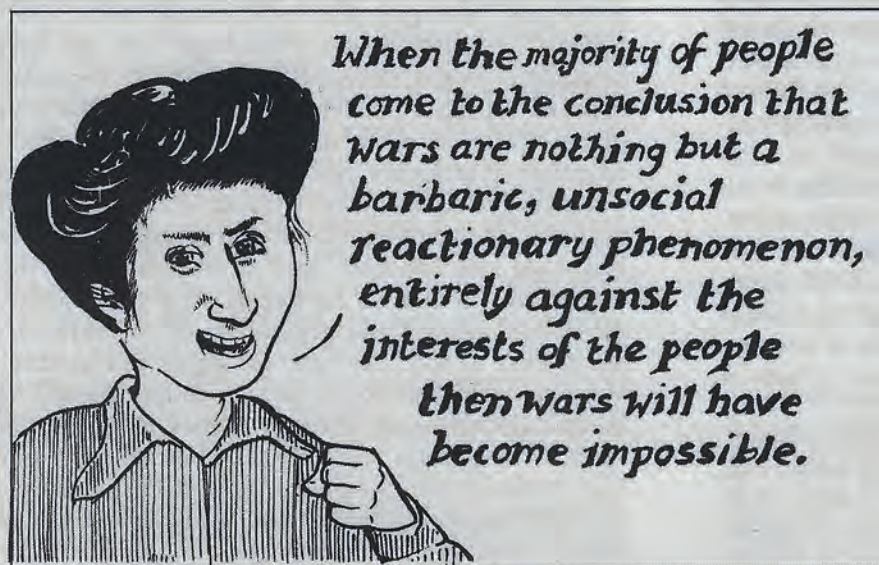
Bronner and Michael Thompson arguing for an approach that appreciates the potentially liberatory qualities of the republican state and gradualist programs of radical reform, and Alan Johnson, David Camfield, Paul Le Blanc, and Barry Finger defending a revolutionary councilist tradition that seeks to overthrow the republican state and replace it with a network of direct organs of popular control.

In siding with Bronner and Thompson, Maisano underscores that Luxemburg’s legacy includes both direct action and “the need for political representation, leadership, and discipline.” This nuanced approach allows Maisano to argue that democracy is both “direct *and* representative,” horizontal *and* vertical. This same argument goes for our understanding of the state, “one that allows for a significant amount of space for popular participation in policy making and administration” as well as of a political party involving “a broad formation that allows for radicals of different persuasions to come together in a pluralistic and egalitarian institutional space.”

Speaking from decades of experience on the left, Hirsch, in “Contra Bronner on Luxemburg and Working-Class Revolution,” argues that

Luxemburg’s strengths lay in viewing history as an interactive process, not a dislocated series of events. She understood, long before Edward Thompson, that social classes were relationships and not categories or things. Luxemburg, with her long view that working people had to be prepared—not just persuaded or anxious—to rule, is an enigma for those conditioned to think revolutions are made by clusters of dedicated operatives, rather than as an expression of a class in formation evolving in experience, consciousness, collective action, and social conditions.

In response to Bronner’s argument that socialism



Kate Evans, www.cartoonkate.co.uk

is today only an ethical commitment, Hirsch argues, "From the standpoint of class struggle, socialism is not an ethical ideal or a consumer choice; it's a necessity for survival as a culture and as a species."

Unfortunately, the collection fails to mention Luxemburg's contributions regarding the condition of women, namely their formal political exclusion despite their intense informal political involvement. Bronner is on record saying, "There is no use artificially trying to turn [Luxemburg] into a forerunner of feminist theory or practice." Although it is true that Luxemburg never privileged an identity-based politics, surely she was an advocate of what would later become known as socialist feminism. After all, she agreed with Charles Fourier's assessment that "In any society, the degree of female emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation."

Schulman has brought together a collection that should be read widely and used in study groups. In addition, I recommend *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg: Volume I: Economic Writings 1*, edited by Peter Hudis and recently released by Verso. This is the first in an ambitious series of Luxemburg's writings. It contains not only works that have never appeared in English, but also a new translation of her doctoral thesis and ten previously undiscovered manuscripts.

Next year, Verso will publish a graphic biographical novel, *Red Rosa*, written by Kate Evans and edited by Paul Buhle. Evans generously shared a few advance images, shown here. Evans's book was made possible by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation of Berlin, which, thanks to the funding given to German political parties based on electoral returns, has now opened an office in New York. The NYC office

has become a central location for funding, research, and support for the promotion of democratic socialism in the United States, keeping the legacy of Luxemburg and her thought alive. ❖



*Nichole Shippen is Assistant Professor of Political Science at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, N.Y. Her forthcoming book, Decolonizing Time: Work, Leisure, and Freedom (Palgrave Macmillan) will be published in September.*

## Socialist Organizing Retreat

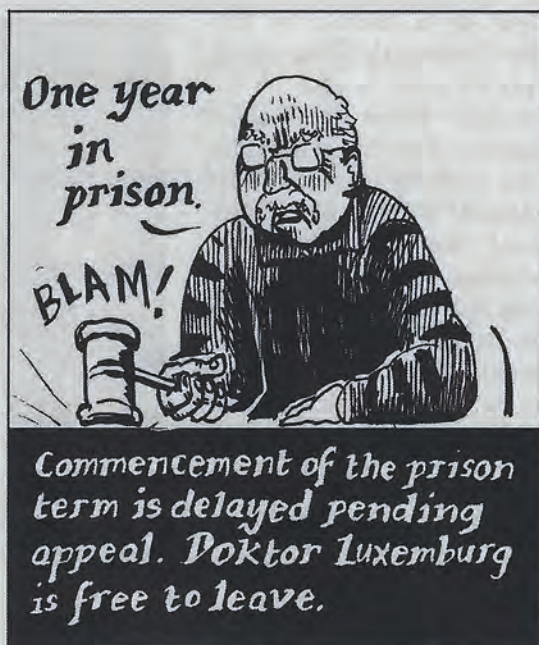
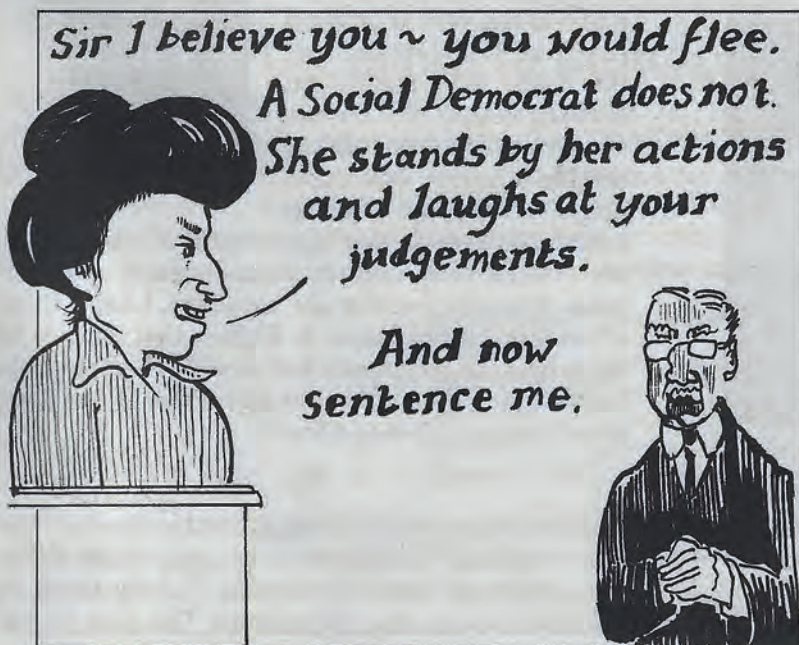
August 7-10

Antiochian Village  
Bolivar, Pennsylvania

If you are a YDSer or young DSAer building a chapter or involved in DSA's national projects, this leadership development retreat is for you.

For more information, email [yds@dhsausa.org](mailto:yds@dhsausa.org) or check out [fund-dhsausa.nationbuilder.com/](http://fund-dhsausa.nationbuilder.com/)

*A project of the DSA Fund*



Kate Evans, [www.cartoonkate.co.uk](http://www.cartoonkate.co.uk)

# Summer Reads for Reds

## Political Fiction

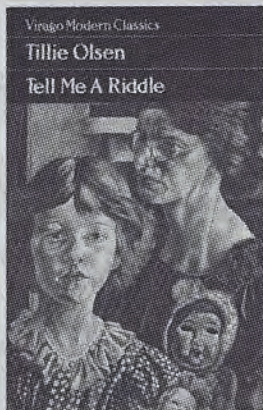
**S**ure, you'll be out organizing and agitating this summer, but when you do take a break, here are some suggestions of political novels culled from among members of the *Democratic Left* board and the National Political Committee. If you try them out, we encourage you to order from a local independent bookseller. *Ed.*

*The Green Corn Rebellion*, by **William Cunningham**: This 2010 reissue of the powerful 1935 novel about the 1917 rebellion by Oklahoma's tenant farmers, members of the Socialist Party, against the draft and World War I is still gripping. There is a fine introduction by historian Nigel Sellars, author of *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma*. I half-expected this to be mainly of historic and regional interest, but I was pleasantly surprised. It stands alongside Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Upton Sinclair's better work. *Stuart Elliot*



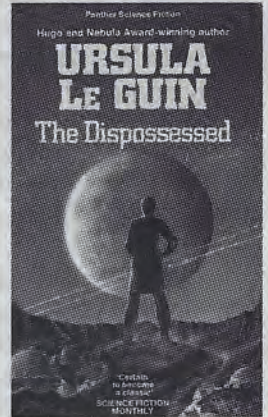
&

*Tell Me a Riddle*, by **Tillie Olsen**: It's not a novel, but I'll make a case for including these four short stories. The book includes the working-class feminist classic, "I Stand Here Ironing," the monologue of a mother reflecting on raising her youngest daughter in poverty. It's fairly autobiographical. Union organizing and mothering four children (the first of which she had at age 19) prevented Olsen from being very prolific. She produced beautiful and insightful political prose, with an eleventh-grade education and very little time to dedicate to her craft. *Amber Frost*



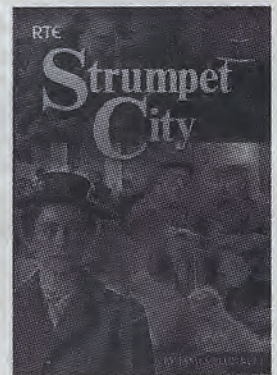
&

*The Dispossessed*, by **Ursula Le Guin**: This science fiction work is the most astute political novel I have ever read. Shevek, a scientist who grew up in the anarchist community formed on the moon Anarres after its founders were exiled from the Earth-like home planet Urras, comes to oppose the rigid thinking and conformity of anarchist society and travels to the home planet. At first, he is impressed by the richness and apparent freedom of the dominant capitalist society on Urras, but learns that this is based on the oppression of the poor majority. He joins a popular uprising that is repressed with brutal force. Shevek returns to Anarres, still believing in the anarchist ideal and determined to risk the opprobrium of his fellow anarchists by fighting for his individual beliefs. *Paul Garver*



&

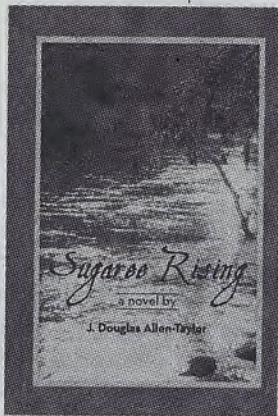
*Strumpet City*, by **James Plunkett**: The story is set among the Dublin working class from 1907 to the great lockout of 1913. It's neither a dreary prolet-cult tome nor a tale of the valiant boyos of the Irish Republican Army. It's about fully fleshed-out working people who are not simply nationalists battling British influence but trade-union class fighters warring against both their own gentry and British capital. It's a super read, and the characters are unforgettable. Plus, the politics are excellent. I can't think of another political novel in English that touches all those bases so poignantly and so well. Read the book before trying the mini-series with Peter O'Toole and Peter Ustinov. *Michael Hirsch*



&

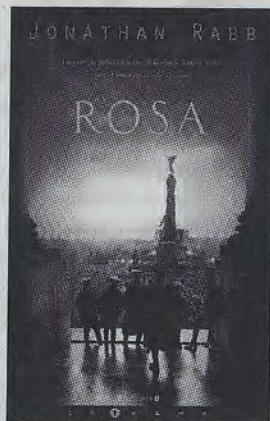
*Sugaree Rising*, by **J. Douglas Allen-Taylor**: The San Francisco journalist J. Douglas Allen-Taylor tells a fictional story of resistance loosely based on the true history of a 1930s South Carolina Gullah

community threatened with flooding and displacement by a government hydroelectric project. It is about the ways the community preserved its traditions and solidarity after the end of slavery and gives us the rich diversity of personalities who made up the community. The writing is amazing, with just enough dialect to be poetic. It's told mostly from the point of view of a teenage girl who is trying to figure out what's going on. I fell in love with it. *Barbara Joye*



&

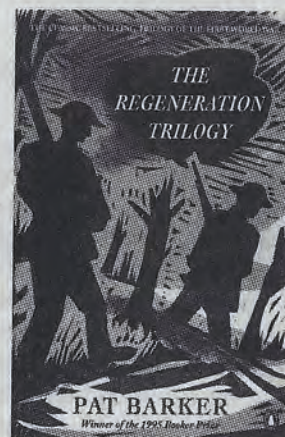
*Rosa*, by **Jonathan Rabb**: I'm not a fan of books about serial killings of women, but the political twist, when the fifth body dredged from the canal might be that of Rosa Luxemburg, got me. Detective Inspector Nikolai Hoffner—a stock character clueless about family relationships, drinking too much, and an honest cop working under a dishonest government—can feel the noose tightening in Weimar Berlin as political currents swirl around him. It doesn't quite work as a mystery,



but the ominous foreshadowing of the horror to come gives us a sense of what it might have been like to live in that era. *Maxine Phillips*

&

*The Regeneration Trilogy*, by **Pat Barker**: These three novels trace the psychological impact of World War I experiences on several historical and fictional figures. In *Regeneration*, psychiatrist Dr. W. H. R. Rivers treats victims of shell shock, including poet Siegfried Sassoon; emerging poet Wilfred Owen; and the fictional working-class officer Billy Prior. *The Eye in the Door* explores the government's targeting of pacifists and homosexuals. Action in *The Ghost Road* takes place in France and, by reminiscence, Melanesia, where Rivers previously conducted ethnographic research. While in Europe men are becoming mentally ill from going to war, Melanesians are suffering mental illness from being forbidden to engage in traditional warfare. I loved the vivid characters and rich context. *Peg Strobel*



#### C L A S S I F I E D

**A PALER SHADE OF RED: Memoirs of a Radical**, by DSA member W. E. Gutman, is an acerbic, iconoclastic and disquieting work of remarkable scope, vigor and passion. ISBN 978-1-927360-96-5. \$21.95. Available from Barnes and Noble, Amazon, Powell's Books, etc.

## Send Greetings to Democratic Left on Labor Day

Wish us well, pay tribute to a comrade or comrades, list your own labor blog, or advertise your book. This magazine is the public face of our organization. It is going into its 42nd year of bringing you theory, practice, and just plain information about our movement. Let's keep it going and keep it strong. Send a check or donate online and specify that it is for *Democratic Left* and you'll see your name in the Labor Day issue and on the *Democratic Left* blog.

**Don't delay. Deadline for copy is June 30.**

#### NAME ONLY

Reader: \$20 \_\_

Supporter: \$40 \_\_

Sustainer: \$60 \_\_

Booster: \$80 \_\_

Cadre: \$100 \_\_

#### ADS

Special Blog Listing: \$50 \_\_

Quarter-page: \$250 \_\_

Half-page: \$500 \_\_

Full page: \$1,000 \_\_

Inside front or back cover: \$1,100 \_\_

Email your copy to [mstart@dsausa.org](mailto:mstart@dsausa.org) and mail your check to Editor, *Democratic Left*, Suite 702, 75 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038. If you are advertising a service or product, the cost may be tax deductible to you as a business expense.

# Spot-on, After All These Years

By Michael Hirsch

## *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*

By Robert Tressell

We don't think of philanthropists as ragged: louche, maybe even a tad shabby, as with trust-fund hipsters or Palo Alto billionaires, but never ragged. In writing his early-twentieth-century British classic, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, Robert Tressell (the pen name of Robert Noonan) wanted to drive home his point. The biggest benefactors of the rich are workers. His is a portrait of hard-pressed working people and their counterintuitive respect and political and economic support for their rulers.

Tressell's figures, drawn from his own experiences as a house painter and sign writer, not only accept the social order and its extremes as natural and inevitable, but think that only slackers complain about the pitiless hard work and early deaths.

A hundred years after publication, the central message of the book rings true. It was an instant success in 1914 and remains the pre-eminent novel of the British working-class left. The full manuscript was first published in the United States in 1962 and was re-issued in the United Kingdom with new material in 2010. Largely autobiographical—the subtitle reads, “Being the Story of Twelve Months in Hell, told by one of the damned, and written down, by Robert Tressell”—it's a curious and successful amalgam of art and socialist propaganda.

The descriptions of working-class life, including everyday interactions and the physical conditions of workers' homes, show an eye for detail that rivals Henry James and the best ethnographies. The book centers on a group of house painters, skilled workers who are underpaid, poorly educated, and always in debt—for necessities, not luxuries. Beaten down as they are, they still vote for their bosses' two parties—in their day the Tories and Liberals (the newly emerging Labour Party was still a minor player).

These fictional but very representative working people are under the thumb of papers such as the *Daily Obscurer* and the *Weekly Chloroform*; attend the Church of the Whited Sepulchre; work for bosses named Sweater, Makehaste, and Slogg; elect a town council comprising “The Forty Thieves”; and have

daughters who work as parlor maids for the likes of the harridan Mrs. Starvum and rentiers like Lady Slumrent. The most boss-friendly toadies are named Crass and Slime.

Frank Owen, the book's protagonist, works as a house painter and, as a socialist, tries with little success to get the others to see that they are playing a mug's game (hence the name of the fictional town, Mugsborough). His fellows regard him “as a bit of a crank; for it was felt there must be something wrong about a man who took no interest in [horse and dog] racing or football and was always talking a lot of rot about religion and politics.”

Some of that “rot” was Owen's view of capitalism as “one big Swindle,” where the “unnatural order” may claim affinity with Christian communal values but only rewards those who act like feral lone wolves, because the logic of the system demands selfishness.

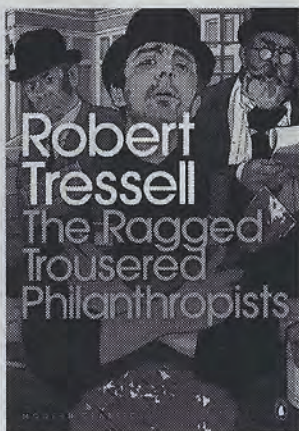
“We must be selfish or we shall be hungry and ragged and finally die in the gutter,” Owen notes. “The more selfish we are, the better we will be. In the ‘Battle of Life,’ only the selfish and cunning are able to survive; all others are beaten down and

trampled under foot.”

During one lunch break, Owen is coaxed into revisiting what his mates think is the outrageous claim that lack of money is not the cause of poverty, and his response—without using the words “exchange value” or “surplus value” or citing Karl Marx—shoots down the idea that socialism is about sharing or about putting more money into circulation but is instead about “discovering the reason why there is not enough produced for everyone to enjoy abundance.” So, poverty is not the lack of money: “it consists [instead] in a shortage of the necessities of life—or rather, of the benefits of civilization.”

Too much propaganda and too little art? Tressell gets the balance right, I think. He writes in his introduction that his work “is not a treatise or an essay, but a novel,” and that his aim was “to write a readable story full of human interest and based on the happenings of everyday life, the subject of Socialism being treated incidentally.” Also repeatedly and essentially, but applied with an exacting brush, not a trowel. ❖

*Michael Hirsch is a labor journalist, political writer, and member of New York DSA and the Democratic Left editorial committee.*



# Occupy Davis to Democratic Socialism

By Melody Yee

In 2011, millions of people saw the footage of police officer John Pike pepper-spraying seated, unarmed protesters at the University of California-Davis, and many followed subsequent investigations, demonstrations, and court cases. But an under-reported story from Occupy Davis is that the movement brought together five activists, including one of those who were attacked, to form the Davis Democratic Socialists (DDS), which is affiliated with the Young Democratic Socialists (YDS). It now has about 20 active members and is one of the most politically active groups on the UC Davis campus.

For the past few quarters, we have worked closely with two of the unions on campus: AFSCME Local 3299, which represents the on-campus service workers and the patient-care workers in the UC medical centers, and UAW local 2865, which represents the academic student employees (such as tutors, readers, and teaching assistants). Although our short-term goal is to build student support for each union's contract campaign, our ultimate goal is to build a lasting network between workers and students so we can fight for a more just, equitable, and democratic university.

To foster support for these campaigns, we have conducted public political education events such as an ice cream social(ist), at which YDS National Organizer Neal Meyer explained socialism over ice cream, and a lecture by *Counterpunch* editor Jeffrey St. Clair on the state of the U.S. left and the life of a political journalist. We conducted internal education on privatization of the university so that we could better support both AFSCME and UAW workers in their short-term strikes against the university.

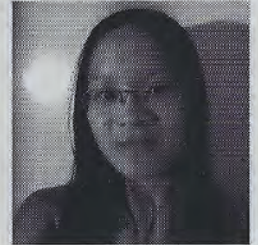
Our support for the unions has been creative and varied, from banner drops to marches to giving testimony at the bargaining table. During the AFSCME strike on November 20, 2013, hundreds of workers, graduate students, and undergrads came out to protest the university's intimidation tactics. In April, UAW 2865 held an Unfair Labor Practice strike, for which about 200 undergraduates came out in support.

## Painting the Big Picture

But what does socialist organizing look like for students? We always aim to weave in a socialist narrative—one that connects issues such as feminism,

racism, homophobia, and imperialism—with issues facing fellow students and workers on campus. For example, we link problems such as increasing class sizes, the over-reliance on adjunct lecturers, and the systematic defunding of the ethnic studies departments as examples of how the university has been adopting a more corporate model, which values profits over human dignity and even education itself. We make the argument that, as socialists, we must fight for a university community run collectively by students and all workers and a democratic society run by all, not just the privileged few. We are still very far from our goal. However, with every heart we turn and every campaign we win, we march ever closer. ❖

*Melody Yee is a second-year neurobiology, physiology, and behavior major at UC-Davis and the current convener of the Davis Democratic Socialists.*



## The Activist's Guide to Using DSA Literature

By Elizabeth Henderson

Now that the weather is warmer and the days longer, it's time to set up a DSA table in a high-traffic site. Whether you're collecting signatures for the Drop Student Debt! petition, running a get-out-the-vote campaign, or spreading the word about the need to increase the minimum wage, the DSA website ([www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org)) has something you can use. Here's a quick rundown of how to find literature, adapt it to a specific campaign, and arrange it on your table in a way that makes folks want to stop and learn more about what your local chapter is doing.

Start by visiting [www.dsausa.org/resources](http://www.dsausa.org/resources) to find everything from introductory fliers about DSA, official DSA statements, and fact sheets to Q&As and articles about socialist strategy. Articles either have a "PDF" or "print" button next to them, so you can easily make copies to distribute.

Next, pick a spot with plenty of foot traffic. A corner or any transit hub is best, so that you have

For the latest in the Justice for Cecily McMillan campaign, go to [dsausa.org](http://dsausa.org)

people coming from multiple directions. If you have time, scout it out beforehand. Be sure you're not violating any local ordinances.

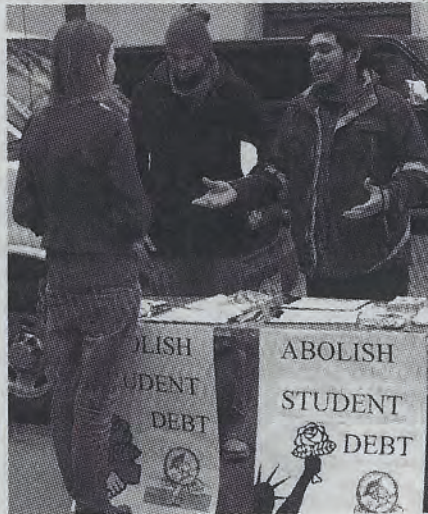
It's worth it to personalize the literature. Add your Local's contact information, as well as your logo and details about how to find your Local on social media. Be sure you also have some fliers about upcoming events or actions that your Local is organizing. If you're printing or copying fliers yourself, write "labor donated" in small print at the bottom. If you're gathering signatures on a petition and there are people who are interested in learning more about your Local, put a star next to their name on the petition so you can remember to follow up with them. Otherwise, use a sign-up sheet.

Making sure that your table looks inviting is a key part of successful

tabling. Put a large sign in front and on the sides of your table with a short slogan summing up why you're tabling that also includes the DSA logo. (For

example, if you're petitioning for the Drop Student Debt! campaign, the sign could simply read "Drop Student Debt!") Organize your literature so it's easy for people to browse, and make your table extra-welcoming with a tablecloth and free candy and DSA pins. Keep a few rocks or paperweights on hand to hold down fliers in case it's windy. But, remember that the most important part of tabling is having two friendly people at the table. ♦

*Elizabeth Henderson is co-chair of Greater Philadelphia DSA and chair of the Drop Student Debt! committee.*



NYC DSAers table at Hunter College.

## Change the USA! Join the DSA!

Yes, I want to join the Democratic Socialists of America. Enclosed are my dues (includes a subscription to *Democratic Left*) of:

\$65 Sustainer  \$35 Introductory  \$20 Low-Income/Student

Yes, I want to renew my membership in DSA. Enclosed are my renewal dues of:

\$65 Sustainer  \$45 Regular  \$20 Low-Income/Student

Enclosed is an extra contribution of:  \$50  \$100  \$25 to help DSA in its work.

Please send me more information about DSA and democratic socialism.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Year of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City / State / Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

Union Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_

Bill my credit card: Circle one: MC Visa No. \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Expiration Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
month year

My interests are:

- Labor
- Religion
- Youth
- Anti-Racism
- Feminism
- LGBTQI Rights
- International
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

RETURN TO  
**Democratic Socialists  
of America**

75 Maiden Lane, Suite 702  
New York, NY 10038  
212-727-8610  
[dsa@dsausa.org](mailto:dsa@dsausa.org)  
[www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org)