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## What's Left : Progressive Strategy After Obama Year One

By Joseph M. Schwartz

James Carville's 1992 campaign mantra, "It's the economy, stupid" ought to be rebranded for the Obama administration as "It's the jobs, stupid." As any first-year political science student knows, if unemployment is not steadily falling and real family income is not rising in the 18 months before a federal election, chances are the White House incumbent will be a one-term president. Even the claim that the president's stimulus plan saved more than 2 million jobs – impossible to definitively prove – provides little solace to the some 25 million Americans either unemployed, underemployed, no longer searching for work or working far fewer hours than they need. Yet the administration is celebrating the creation of 140,000 (mostly temporary) jobs in March, when it would take job growth of 350,000 per month over the next 4 years (!) to replace the seven million jobs lost in the Great Recession (plus employ the 120,000 young persons who join the labor force each month).

Short of mass social unrest, Congress is unlikely to pass a major public jobs bill, as a congressional majority of Blue-Dog Democrats and Republicans fear a long-term structural deficit more than they do long-term, high unemployment. Nor will the White House endorse a strong public jobs program when its Treasury Department is run by the gnomes of Wall Street who believe the anti-Keynesian dogma that public investment inevitably crowds out private investment, even when private investment is anemic.

The president knows the best-kept secret in American politics: our long-term structural deficit did not fall from the sky. Republican and Democratic neoliberal policies over the past 30 years, including tax cuts on corporations and the rich, hugely expanded and wasteful military expenditures and the government's failure to take on the private health care industry and control health-care inflation (whose costs have gone from 11 per cent of the GDP in 1992 to 17 per cent today) are to blame for the deficit. With political will, it could easily be reversed.



Joseph M. Schwartz

But President Obama fears that embracing the revenue-raising powers of progressive taxation opens him to charges of being a tax-and-spend, weak on defense and craven on terrorism Democrat. Hence the inevitable Afghan quagmire. Hence the speed in compromising on health care. Yet what good does the president's buffing his neoliberal credentials do when such policies won't lower unemployment rates? These rates alone virtually guarantee electoral defeat for his party in 2010 and for himself in 2012! Why not tell the truth: that amid a collapse in private investment and consumption, only massive counter-cyclical public investment in alternative energy, mass transit, and infrastructure can put Americans back to work and restore the consumer demand needed to spur private capital investment?

Mainstream pundits hold that popular disgust at the massive increase in the federal deficit and the "unpopular" health care plan are what caused the mass defection of Democrats to Scott Brown, the GOP candidate in Massachusetts' special election for Senate. They are wrong! The size of the deficit is rarely a dominant concern (what social scientists call a "valence issue") in the voting behavior of moderate-income individuals. They tolerate deficit spending if unemployment is low and real income growth is strong; only the political elites and business care about deficits per se.

Martha Coakley, the defeated Democratic nominee, won college-educated voters by 5 per cent; but she lost

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# What's Next?

By Frank Llewellyn

**A**fter passage and signing into law of a modest health care plan, one would think that mainstream politicians would be ready to move to the next issue. Yet seven minutes after the president signed the bill, 14 attorneys general, all but one of them Republicans, filed lawsuits of dubious merit in the hope that the judiciary would turn their loss into a victory. Republicans promise to make repeal a central plank of the 2010 and 2012 elections, when their “charge” of “it’s socialism” will be heard for the umpteenth time.

In DSA we never expected more than the passage of an imperfect bill that we could work in coalitions to improve. The health care system this legislation establishes is a far cry from what this country needs. DSA has been fighting for a single-payer, Medicare-for-all approach to national health care for more than two decades. We expect to continue to fight for that approach in a number of states, especially in California, as the state legislature has passed single payer legislation in the past, only to have it overturned by a gubernatorial veto. We will also be paying attention to what happens nationally. The administrative rule-making process that precedes the implementation of the bill must be monitored so that the legislation is not made worse. We will continue to fight for improvements to “Obama care” while doing our best to dispel the myth that this bribe to the private insurers so that they don’t dump patients is “socialism.” DSAers in every state and city should be prepared to rebut distortions with letters to the editor and op-eds that talk about what socialism really is – and what true social democratic public provision would look like, particularly when health care is the paradigmatic public good that markets, let alone for-profit oligopolies, simply cannot justly and affordably supply.

In the next few years DSA health care activists should work to reduce the tension between those sisters and brothers who went primarily for the “public option” approach and those of us who were for “single payer.” Neither group achieved its desired outcome, not because we weren’t unified behind a common program, but because the insurance companies’ and health care providers’ lobbies were too strong. Neither progressive advocacy group was able to demonstrate, in political terms, that we represented a movement strong enough to punish politicians who didn’t support our demands. Progressives must now work to ensure that some conservative Democrats who did not support the final bill will be punished with primaries or even third party challenges. In New York State, for example, the Working Families Party (WFP) threatened to withhold support from, or actively oppose, representatives for whom the WFP provided winning margins in the past, but who voted “no” on the health reform bill. And the labor movement also vowed to remember how people voted on this issue in this year’s election cycle. Those of us committed to true public provision of health care can reunite by participating in such efforts.

Politically, passage of the bill is a positive step. First, because it keeps open the possibility of passage of other reforms in this Congress, and second, because it should create millions of new stakeholders in a health care system governed by democratically established rules rather than by the fiats of private insurers. The Right will attempt to use the bill’s shortcomings to generate public sentiment for repeal; progressives have to use those same shortcomings to generate public support for more short-term improvements, and in the long term to build support for the elimination of private insurers. If the subsidies are not high enough to make mandated coverage (starting in 2014) for currently uninsured working and middle class families affordable, there could be a serious populist backlash against the program.

But passage of the bill does keep the door open for popular movements to demand strict financial regulatory reform, immigration reform, massive aid to states and localities, and a much-needed public jobs program. DSA and the larger progressive movement must create street heat in favor of these anti-corporate measures, as well as for a just resolution to the foreclosure crisis, and an end to United States involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As I write this article the Senate is turning to financial reform. The bill does not adequately re-regulate the banking sector (including the shadow banking system of hedge funds and private equity firms) so as to put an end to the over-leveraged speculation that put the entire economy at risk. The final bill must also include an independent Consumer Protection Agency to protect citizens from predatory behavior. In DSA’s view, neither the House bill that passed earlier this year, nor Senator Dodd’s bill, are strong enough. We must support progressive senators’ efforts to toughen the current Senate version. If the Republicans resort to filibusters, the Left should pressure Democrats to make the Republicans actually orally filibuster, instead of allowing another technical faux filibuster that allows GOP senators to obstruct reform absent the cost to reactionary Republican senators forced to obstruct in plain sight.

The issues around meaningful financial reform – the mortgage crisis, bonuses, risky trading in derivatives and other opaque financial instruments – can be affected by community organizing strategies as well as legislative ones. The large financial institutions that benefited from federal bailouts have used those funds to lobby against reform, award executives large bonuses and reap large profits from continued speculation that created the crisis in the first place. But their balance sheets are still vulnerable. Programs to move checking accounts and other demand deposits from money center banks to community banks or credit unions are one form of pressure that will make the bankers take notice – if such efforts are large enough.

Common action by underwater mortgage holders would be more difficult to organize, but potentially highly effective.

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The failure of the Bush, and now Obama, administrations to force banks and other mortgage holders to reduce the value of underwater mortgages to current market value is generating wave after wave of foreclosures. The crisis has spread far beyond the sub-prime mortgage market as the recession deepened and tens of millions experienced job losses and substantially reduced income. But as few as 1,000 underwater-mortgage-holders acting in unison might be able to move hundreds of millions of dollars from the asset to the liability side of a bank's balance sheet, something that would strike fear in the hearts of bankers and their regulators. If our coalitions are creative, careful and well organized they might be able to accomplish some things that Congress hasn't. But creating solidarity among underwater mortgage holders who fear that refusing to pay interest on inflated property values could land them on the streets will necessitate an anti-foreclosure movement comparable to that of the early 1930s. Radicals played a key role in that movement to "put the furniture back in when the sheriff took it out" – and we will have to do so again.

The number one issue for the coming period is jobs. In December the House passed a \$150 billion jobs bill, which has languished in the Senate. So far two very small jobs bills, mostly focused on tax cuts, have gotten out of the Senate to become law. But absent substantial public jobs programs and massive aid to states and localities, the Great Recession will continue, and probably deepen. In the Senate, Senator Bernie Sanders (Ind-VT) sponsored a bill aimed at generating green jobs by providing rebates for solar panels; he has also co-sponsored other green jobs legislation. In the House of Representatives, George Miller (D-Ca.) introduced the Local Jobs for America Act that will appropriate \$75 billion over two

years to local communities to hold off planned cuts or to hire back workers for local services who have been laid off because of tight budgets. Funding would go directly to eligible local communities and nonprofit community organizations to decide how best to use the funds.

We support these jobs bills, but all of them taken together are not large enough to generate the number of jobs required to turn the economy around, let alone make up for the massive layoffs likely to result from upcoming massive state and local budget cuts. DSA locals and individual members must join the rallies and demonstrations organized by the AFL-CIO, Jobs with Justice and others, behind the slogan "Make Wall Street Pay." Taxing Wall Street and bank bonuses issued this year would provide significant funds for job creation. It's shocking how little congressional action has been proposed to support public sector jobs that provide critical services, especially in a recession. Seen just in economic terms, the likely layoff of close to one million state and local employees over the next 8-12 months could cut purchasing power sufficiently to create a double dip recession.

On March 21, tens of thousands of demonstrators rallied in Washington to demand immigration reform. At no point in the 14-month struggle for health care did we see a similar number of demonstrators turn out. If we had, perhaps that struggle would have seen a better result. Immigration reform that includes a *speedy* path to citizenship is a critically important issue, and legislative action remains an unfilled campaign promise. The drive for immigration reform has generated a genuine social movement whose energy will be needed if we are to counter the right-wing populism that has emerged in the last year.

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And then there are the two wars. DSA continues to oppose them and supports congressional efforts to end funding for them. Each budget resolution and appropriation bill provides an opportunity to build a political coalition to de-fund the wars. When we are told false horror stories about the “fiscal irresponsibility” of deficit spending (in a Great Recession!) we must respond that cuts in wasteful “defense” spending, a restoration of progressive income tax rates to the pre-Reagan era, and a curtailment of massive waste in our health care system by instituting a single-payer alternative, would readily restore “fiscal balance” to the federal budget (and enable us to fund universal, high-quality social programs that serve basic human needs).

Many members of Congress will want to avoid any more “tough” votes before the elections. We must remind them that social and economic justice is not something they can run from and is good politics to boot.

Legislative fights are fast moving. DSANEWS, DSA’s electronic newsletter, provides action alerts, and the latest news from our coalition efforts on legislation and direct organizing. We also will keep you posted on media coverage of DSA and report on significant actions by our local organizations. DSANEWS is the best way to keep informed about DSA’s activity. We encourage every member to visit our web site [www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org) and sign up for DSANEWS. ♦

## Tarnished Golden State: Fighting Education Cutbacks

*By Duane E. Campbell*

Over 8,000 students and their supporters rallied outside the California State Capitol in Sacramento on March 22 to demand adequate funding for education. Students brought buses of demonstrators from community colleges throughout central and northern California. This march, organized primarily by community college groups and their allies, was the latest in a series of demonstrations. Forty other protests were staged across the state, with staff, students and faculty from the California State University and University of California systems and community colleges.

At the primary and secondary levels, students, faculty, workers and public education supporters protested deep cuts to education funding as a part of a march for public education. Over 22,000 teachers in California have received layoff notices. Protesters have insisted that public education and public services need their funding restored to meet urgent needs. A particularly effective strategy at the rallies was to have students share their own personal experiences with budget cuts.

In a system once famous for affordable quality in higher education, University of California regents voted to increase tuition an additional 32 percent in the fall of 2009, placing in-state tuition at \$10,302 for undergraduate work. Cal State tuition has increased 182 percent since 2002. Classes have been cut as the universities have furloughed faculty, while students struggle to get into classes that have been canceled.



George Lakoff addresses students at Sacramento rally on March 4, 2010

A reduced class schedule causes many students to delay graduation for years, piling up ever-increasing debt burdens; a six-year university education is much more expensive for the student and state than a four-year education.

The California Faculty Association (NEA) represents faculty on the 23 campuses of the California State University. CFA members, staff and allied students helped to organize many of the nationally-covered demonstrations on March 4. Student-led protests on some UC campuses included brief occupations of buildings. The Sacramento rally and the demonstrations around the state were the product of months of grassroots student organizing.

Professor George Lakoff, a well known messaging strategist, argued at the March 4 event for a petition drive for the California Democracy Act. If passed after the legally required 600,000 signatures were gathered from registered voters, this act would reduce the requirement to pass a state budget from the current two thirds of each house of the legislature to a simple majority. Lakoff asserted that all the demonstrations would mean little unless the California Democracy Act passes in the November election, so that revenue can be raised to fund California’s needs, including education. Lakoff criticized leaders of the California Democratic Party for not getting enthusiastically behind the initiative. At press time the campaign is far behind the required number of signatures. Lakoff argued that an online campaign which would “go viral” was needed to push the initiative.

The media generally gave sympathetic coverage to the demonstrations, but the loose coalition of activists lacks a clear strategy for achieving their goals. At present there is no measure on the November 2010 ballot that raises significant new money for education. Activists can use mass action to pressure legislators and the Governor to redirect excessive spending on prisons and other wasteful programs to education, but there is no chance this year of getting enough Republicans to win the necessary two-thirds vote in the Legislature. To resist further budget cuts students and unions must connect public education with other societal issues involving budget cutbacks.

The economic crisis at the state level has resulted in budget cuts in K-12 and higher education, transportation, libraries, environmental programs, parks, and key social welfare systems in the state and across the nation. This protracted economic decline has had a devastating impact on the California budget and the budgets of 42 other states. Revenues have continued to plunge and legislatures have made a series of deep cuts from coast to coast. The state of California cannot, by law, pass a budget with a deficit as can the federal government. California's tax structure exacerbates these problems by relying on revenue streams that fall precipitously when the economy suffers.

Sacramento Local DSA was an active participant in developing these demonstrations through our work with the

Sacramento Progressive Alliance. We have also been working with unions and faculty groups since October, providing training, workshops, campus tabling and organizing efforts to encourage campuses in the three college systems to work together, link to advocates for primary and secondary public education, and use the California Democracy Initiative to grow a movement. ♦

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## The Fiscal Crises of the States: Neoliberalism's Next Terrain of Struggle, and Ours

By Michael Hirsch

**S**ocial peace as corporate America's prescription for sound labor relations was always more mist than material, but even that fog lifted after the Reagan Administration destroyed the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization in 1981. The PATCO attack declared open season for union hunting, leading to a radical shrinking of union density in the private sector, a downsizing of heavy industry and an outsourcing of jobs to low-wage nations. Now get ready for the ongoing assault on public sector workers, for a drastic shrinking in the services they provide, and for the political space and opportunity for a fight back.

Virtually every state is undergoing a second or third round of budget cuts, an evisceration of public services and an ideological and political attack on its public sector workers and their unions led by state businesses, their good-government toy poodles and right-of-center think tanks. In order to fill huge budget holes, public workers are being laid off or their positions attrited, even as more contracts – often noncompetitively bid and often not even cost-effective – are let to private vendors for the same work. California, Illinois and New York are the hardest hit, in part because their public services are among the most generous, even as states' elected officials studiously avoid enacting progressive tax legislation.

The states' budget shortfalls – what John Shure of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities calls “a revenue collapse” – are the outcome of the late 2007/2008 recession, the Wall Street mortgage bond market/housing bubble collapse that followed, and the drop in state tax revenues. Yet even before Wall Street's September 2008 crash, 29 states already faced total budget gaps of at least \$48 billion. After Wall Street stopped shuffling housing debt but before the federal government began playing 52 Pick-Up, some \$15 trillion in personal wealth disappeared.

The effect: 8 million jobs lost in the last three years even as the 2009 federal stimulus package led to a growth in GDP and a shrinkage in job losses. The Economic Policy Institute estimates that without the February 2009 Recovery Act's injecting \$787 billion into the economy, the nation would have lost an additional 1.5 million jobs. While many, including Paul Krugman, argued that the stimulus was weak tea compared to the jolt needed to shock the economy awake, it did have demonstrable results. Not so the Bush administration's TARP dollars put into banks too big to fail – the single largest investment the Treasury Department ever made for U.S. banking – and which is still largely unaccounted for.

State government shortfalls in fiscal years 2010 and 2011 are expected to reach \$375 billion, says the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Among the worst hit: California, Illinois and New York, which expect to massively cut health care and education spending and lay off thousands of state workers to close respective shortfalls of \$12.3 billion, \$13 billion and \$9.2 billion.

What these shortfalls mean for the working classes of these states is a collapse in public services, attempts at the mass firing of state and municipal workers, the slaughter of pension and benefit standards and a battle even for the survival of public sector unions, which today constitute the majority of the nation's unionized workforce. The fiscal crises of the states and who pays for the crises is the terrain on which class struggle will be fought in the coming five years.

Don't expect a battle with “the state” in traditional binary, them-and-us terms as much as discrete and localized brawls with several things in common:

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## Fiscal Crisis *from page 5*

- A business class resistant to any diminution of its wealth and power or even assuming a fair share of the tax burden.

- The ratcheting up of press attacks on public workforce salaries and benefits, especially pension funds and health care, abetted by a series of alleged “good-government” groups. New York’s is the Citizens Budget Commission,\* but every major city has one, shilling for the corporate class.

- A public sector battle royal because a majority of the some 15 million unionized workers in the U.S. are now government employees, and budget cuts mean layoffs, which in turn mean hot union-management contention.

- A ripple effect far beyond those union members immediately harmed to all working people and the poor, and a delegitimation of government precisely because it’s not doing its job.

- The real possibilities of a national fight-back, waged state-by-state and even county-by-county.

### The Crisis in NYC Education

I’ll describe the effect of the fiscal crisis on just one sector – public education and its teacher unions in New York City – but remember, every state is weighing what to cut and whom to screw.

Here as elsewhere jobs and tax collections are down. Local politicians and union leaders who last year jumped at the opportunity to tax the rich sadly say it’s a loser this time. Even New York state’s Working Families Party put tax equity on the back burner. Yet as city services deteriorate and the recession wipes out more jobs, the needs of our most vulnerable: children, the elderly, the poor and the sick become more intense.

We know that the backwash of the state’s now \$9.2 billion deficit will slam the city. Education was already precarious after suffering two years of cuts and postponement of the hard-fought-for Campaign for Fiscal Equity dollars that are now on hold and potentially DOA. Now David Paterson, the accidental governor and a lieutenant governor candidate once favored by virtually every city union and liberal sachem, wants to cut school aid statewide by \$1.4 billion. Anywhere from \$500 million to \$600 million would be chopped from New York City school operating funds.

That’s \$11,000 per classroom.

That’s \$400,000 per school.

That’s 8,500 teachers Mayor Bloomberg is threatening to lay off if the state also refuses its state aid to the city, as Paterson proposes.

Even somehow holding schools harmless won’t be enough, when cuts to other city offices such as the Agency for Child Services harm children, too. In the case of ACS, harm goes to the large and growing number of students living in city-run shelters. Imagine the irony of a city cutting shelter funding at precisely the moment banks and sheriffs are stepping up foreclosure proceedings.

Unless reversed, the cuts will yield a school system none of today’s youngest and brightest educators would want to

hire into. It’s madness at a time when a consensus exists that among the most important markers of student success is a qualified, talented and motivated classroom teacher and when so-called education reformers scream that what stands between children and success isn’t fiscal neglect but the two national teachers’ unions whose protection of working and professional standards provide the lion’s share of that motivation. Such alleged reformers advocate school vouchers and shrilly defend charter schools and their right to squat in community school buildings – forgetting that charters are free to cherry-pick students, which means that children with special needs and English language learners are routinely turned away.

Statewide it’s the same grim story, though the governor says the state must end its “spending addiction.” That’s like claiming a starved child has an overactive metabolism.

### The Crisis in the States—What to Do?

Meanwhile, New York’s education crisis is typical. The one exception seems to be Massachusetts, which only flat-lined its school spending increases. In today’s context, that’s a good thing. For the rest, it’s cut to the bone and beyond.

In California last summer, the epicenter of education-budget losses, \$5.9 billion was cut from the schools.

In Hawaii, officials introduced 17 mandatory “Furlough Fridays” for all schools. That’s 17 unpaid vacation days.

In Minnesota, Colorado and Iowa, numerous school districts drafted short week schedules.

In Georgia, school days will be lengthened and the work week shortened, with the effect falling hardest on hourly workers – the school bus drivers, custodial and cafeteria workers – who will lose 20 percent of their pay.

Some people are fighting back, as with the March 4 National Day of Action, which prompted protests in 33 states by students, teachers and unions.

So what’s the nub of the problem? Certainly savings can and should be taken, but the problem is as much demand as supply. As New York’s Fiscal Policy Institute demonstrates, the state doesn’t demand enough revenue. While the Institute wisely calls for a return to progressive taxation, that’s a path few elected officials or activists are proposing.

New York school advocates do back some moderate revenue-raising policies, which the corporate class also predictably opposes. These include: closing corporate tax loopholes; ending the state’s reliance on contracted-out work better done by state employees; redirecting the state’s housing rebates away from the wealthiest homeowners; reducing the Stock Transfer Tax Rebate (yes, the business class gets its gambling fees rebated, too!); taxing sugary beverages and plastic bags; and refinancing tobacco settlement bonds.

Sure, all of these will generate income and obviate many cuts, but they also suggest just how moderate are the forces in

\*See “Talking Union Blog,” March 11, 2010.

play now fighting the cuts. Even a return to progressive tax rates of the mid-1970s is off the table. So is the return to a commuter tax, or eliminating entirely the rebate on stock shuffling. Forget about a tax on total wealth, and not just income.

This weak demand may be the hand we're dealt at a time when part of the problem is the thinness of union density. U.S. labor unions represent just 12 percent of the workforce and only 38 percent of all educators – mostly clustered in a minority of states. That's not enough to shake up the political world. If unions were a bigger section of the population and if unions unmistakably spoke for the interests of broad sections of the working class, organized and unorganized, then more radical demands aimed at a redistribution of wealth would be at least feasible. Still, it's worth staying at the table and playing out even a weak hand, because we can use it to raise the temperature ante on elected officials.

Making demands on elected officials is something much of the Left doesn't do. It shouts slogans and hurls insults (mostly richly deserved) but doesn't make demands. That's the kind of abstinence worthy of a penitent or a flagellant but not an engaged citizenry. Even if you think elected representatives are bought-and-paid-for cats-paws of Wall Street and other business interests, it's time to take lobbying seriously by making demands that can be legislated and that also bother the ruling classes while mobilizing and empowering people.

I know many on the Left consider lobbying a form of accommodation if not the beginning of a devil's bargain, but we need to make demands on those who can reverse the cuts and change the tax laws. So, U.S. leftists: pretend for just one moment that local, state and federal legislators are indeed your representatives, and give them hell. Get them to either do their jobs or prepare for defeat in the next election. Make the political class realize that a broad section of the public is righteously angry. Contra the Tea Baggers, the public is hungry for good public services. And like foes of the Incredible Hulk, they wouldn't want us angry.

And of course there's mass action, because lobbying doesn't preclude other forms of protest. It can even be creative, nonviolent guerilla action, as exemplified by ACT-UP, which blocked tunnels out of Manhattan to raise the profile of AIDS treatment and research funding. Sure, it ticked off commuters, and the less collateral damage the better, but you can't raise the temperature without pissing off somebody. And, as the old organizers' maxim holds, if you're not pissing off anyone, you're probably not doing much good.

Because state cutbacks will devastate working people, what better time to start speaking "truth to power" and organizing the fight-back, as good socialists should? And we won't be alone. The laying off and downsizing of New York subway and bus workers going on as of this writing is a model for how an attack on public workers and a consequent decline in a vital public service becomes a social problem in search of a solution. Beyond the immediate impact on transit workers

and the militant response from a new elected leadership in the Transport Workers Union, the plight of transit workers highlights the effort to privatize government programs, which is being sold as a money-saving deal to politicians either too corrupt or too clueless to get that they are being played.

Equally important is the effect on the public of a collapse in decent transit service – a service built for the new suburban rich of the Gilded Age but maintained for later generations of workers commuting to the city centers and home as the city expanded into five boroughs. Screw with the subway and bus schedules? That's enough to create class anger and fertile ground for left organizing. And the TWU, along with the teachers' union and others, is making common cause with students and parents by solidly backing their demand that the MTA not cancel its free travel for students on school days.

Think of this mix as an algorithm for revolt. ♦

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## Progressive Strategy *from page 1*

non-college-educated voters by 20 per cent, compared to Obama winning these voters by 20 percent in 2008. That means working class voters in just one year swung 40 percentage points against the party of Ted Kennedy, with Coakley even losing union voters in Massachusetts by a 49 to 47 percent margin! Exit polls and focus groups among working class voters found them abandoning the Democrats because of fears of joblessness and concern about the overall state of the economy. African-Americans, suffering not from a Great Recession but a Great Depression, turned out in low numbers. What was to vote for?

Worries about the size of the deficit or about Obama's health care plan ranked far lower in reasons given for voting Republican. Some unionized workers resented the Obama administration's failure to oppose the Senate's proposed health-care excise tax on their alleged "Cadillac" plans. Yet the state's own health care plan, which is similar to Obama's proposed public subsidies for those who cannot afford private insurance, polled relatively well among swing working class voters.

Much of the right-wing populist anger against Obama draws upon white working and lower-middle class fears that public spending disproportionately benefits poor people of color. That's a false perception stoked by the right. The truth is that universal social welfare programs such as Social Security and Medicare dwarf spending on means-tested programs such as TANF and Food Stamps. Yet "Tea Party" populism also draws upon legitimate working class resentment of the bank bail-out, a goody bag to the banks that failed to benefit ordinary citizens. Yet the tea-baggers flirt with their own economic self-destruction when they urge the "government to keep their hands off my Medicare" and to cut taxes and public goods. Corporate elites are perfectly happy to harness right-wing populism to further deregulate the economy and gut public goods that benefit working Americans, including tea baggers.

The President's unwillingness to "unwind" insolvent mega-banks by wiping out shareholders and converting bonds into stock equity (thus shoring up banks' balance sheets) meant that the government bailed out banks with public money and got nothing in return. These funds, plus mega-bank access to near-interest-free federal funds, have allowed investment bankers to continue to pay themselves obscene bonuses and make killings on leveraged purchases of high-interest long-term bonds.

Thus, investment bank profits are again at record highs, even though little of this "investment" is in loans to productive enterprises. The government refused to use its de facto equity holdings in major banks to force them to make loans for productive uses. Now the administration won't even lobby hard for the Senate to pass an independent Consumer Protection Agency to protect ordinary citizens from fraudulent loans and exorbitant fees. Former Federal Reserve Bank chair Paul

Volcker and Congressional bail-out oversight head Elizabeth Warren have called for the restoration of the Glass-Steagall Act's 1935 separation of investment and commercial banking – the act was abolished under President Clinton in 1999 – but these pleas went unheard amid the din of the finance industry churning hundreds of millions of lobbying and campaign contributions to Senate Democrats and Republicans. Despite the crucial role that credit-default swaps and other unregulated derivatives played in causing the crisis, the Senate won't pass legislation compelling these financial time bombs to be traded on transparent and regulated exchanges.

Obama supporters too readily confuse e-mail and Facebook networking with mass mobilization and protest. They believed that a Democratic president presiding over strong Democratic majorities would yield reforms comparable to those of 1934-36 and 1964-66, when Democrats last held the presidency and strong legislative majorities. But the Netroots alone can't change policy. It's going to take people in the streets demanding government end their suffering. Yet with a labor movement decimated by 30 years of corporate deindustrialization and the increased isolation of the poor, the level of public resistance to unemployment and foreclosure does not yet mirror the protest politics of the past.

What's needed are Left activists helping to build popular movements to resist foreclosures, organizing the unemployed and resisting cutbacks in state and local public services. Foreclosures now hit holders of standard 30-year mortgages whose unemployment benefits are running out or whose mortgage is "underwater" (with the debt owed exceeding the assessed value of the property). The Obama administration's initial, much-vaunted \$700 million anti-foreclosure program succeeded only in lowering a handful of mortgages; it neither helped the unemployed nor compelled banks to cram down the value of underwater mortgages.

In recognition of this failure, the administration has now created a \$50 billion fund (from returned TARP funds) to subsidize institutions that voluntarily lower the mortgage payments of the unemployed for three-to-six months to 31 per cent of their current income. The fund will also facilitate Federal Housing Administration (FHA) refinancing of mortgages when and if the original holder of the mortgage voluntarily writes-down the principal owed to the current market value of the home.

But this program is likely to fail dismally, as well. The unemployed will need more than six months' relief; and the widespread "securitization" of mortgages means the mortgage's original holder is extremely difficult to locate. Meanwhile, the financial institution servicing the mortgage has little incentive to write it down. Massive foreclosures will continue until the federal government creates a legally mandatory "right to rent" (at current market value) for distressed homeowners and institutes a mandatory "cram down" program in which the federal government compels all financial institutions involved in the

mortgage process to accept lower mortgage payments based on the current market value of the home. This was done by the FHA during the Great Depression and such steps will again be needed, as we are presently experiencing a similar great depression in home prices.

Classic local resistance to foreclosure is emerging – putting the furniture and family back in the house after the sheriff tosses them out; but only a marked increase in such resistance will produce legislative proposals in favor of a “right to rent” at market value properties facing foreclosure. It’ll take a big movement to force banks to eat some of the capital on their soaked and submerged properties.

Politically savvy unrest like that is the last thing political power brokers want. The right targeted ACORN for destruction precisely because it organizes low-income citizens across racial lines to fight foreclosures and service cutbacks. Yet that kind of in-your-face contestation, and not (or not just) engagement in public intellectual work is what it will take to expand the ideological and social boundaries of American politics. They will expand when and if democratic unrest forces elected officials and opposition candidates to think and act outside of the centrist box, or else.

The Left also needs to join in resisting devastating public service cuts in the next budget cycles. Cuts are already leading to a crisis in education at all levels and to the denuding of public services for the disabled and elderly. On March 4th, high school, college and university students in some 33 states joined faculty, teachers, parents and labor supporters in actions defending public education. But the defense of public goods cannot be left to public sector unionists. With only seven per cent of the private sector work force unionized and the majority of unionized workers in the public sector, the right and its corporate handlers hope to divide the working class through increasingly railing against the “privileged” pay and benefits of public employees.

The Right has long attempted to counterpose the interests of a predominantly white and unorganized lower-middle and working class against a more integrated and unionized public sector workforce. But cuts to suburban public schools, the elderly and uniformed services afford the Left an opportunity to educate the public on the value of public goods. Jobs with Justice and other community-labor coalitions are beginning to organize to demand federal aid to states and localities, and the restoration of progressive state and local taxation that 30 years of neoliberal government overturned. The over-reliance of state and local governments on regressive property taxes has transformed portions of the elderly and home-owning working class into supporters of conservative movements against even progressive taxation.

With the crisis in defined-contribution pensions, the Left must not only defend Social Security, but also educate the public about how the vagaries of private sector employment cannot provide everyone with retirement security

and educational opportunities for their children. Without high-quality public goods financed by equitable forms of taxation an inegalitarian private labor market will create rampant social inequalities.

The neoliberal chickens of deregulation, deunionization, and privatization have come home to roost in a United States that presently ranks as the most inegalitarian and least socially mobile of post-industrial societies. DSA’s Economic Justice Agenda, released in spring 2007, presciently argued that a revitalized United States economy committed to global justice must rest on the “four pillars” of progressive taxation; high-quality, universal public goods; the right to organize; and global trade and investment policy that raises environmental and labor standards as an alternative to race-to-the-bottom global neo-liberalism.

DSA is presently developing an Economic Bill of Rights project that aims to revive FDR’s call for a second bill of rights that would guarantee to all Americans the right to a decent job, health care, education, housing, environmental sustainability, and retirement security. Add to that the need to achieve these rights in the context of a more interdependent global economy and you get a social democratic program for the 21st century. Our analysis is likely to gain even greater salience when Obama’s neoliberal Commission on Fiscal Stability calls for cuts in the Medicare and Social Security benefits and an extension of the retirement age.

But programs absent movements are only pieces of paper without people fighting for them. At the summer 2009 YDS conference, Frances Fox Piven reminded students and young labor activists that in the early 1930s small groups of diverse radicals helped ignite mass movements of the unemployed and the foreclosed that prefigured the mass industrial organizing of the CIO. An even more decentralized cadre of community activists rooted in working class and communities of color exists today.

Yet these potentially incendiary organizers, along with progressives in the labor movement, go largely unnoticed and unsupported by white educated “Obama enthusiasts.” These middle-strata liberals oppose many United States foreign and environmental policies while embracing socially liberal positions on reproductive rights and gay and lesbian rights, but they are not automatic supporters of the trade union movement, let alone redistributive, social democratic economic policies. Organizing for America, the Obama campaign’s post-election vehicle, lit no fires under legislators’ buns for national health care or workers’ rights to join unions. Why? Many of these educated middle strata already have decent health care coverage and think – like neoliberals – that unions are a drain on productivity and capital accumulation.

This is not to demean the middle-strata, largely white, liberal community, or paint them all in the same negative light.

*Continued on page 10*

Socialists have always worked in common not only with class-conscious workers but also with elements of the educated middle strata holding an ethical commitment to social justice. But middle-strata blogging and social networking cannot by themselves alter the legislative instincts of Congress members who troll daily for corporate dollars. After the recent Supreme Court decision putting political office on the block, we desperately need a movement for public funding of federal and state elections. That will take more than the efforts of process-oriented, good-government middle-class reformers.

Thus, demands to eliminate the Senate filibuster and curtail corporate buying of votes must be linked to movements demanding material improvements in the lives of average Americans. Unions, too, now representing only slightly more than 12 percent of the workforce, won't grow merely through the passage of proposed labor law reform unless they embrace social unionism. For the labor movement must organize not just the long-term employees of major corporations, but also the growing "casualized" work force, the 25 percent of U.S. workers who do not have permanent jobs nor the benefits tied to long-term employment. Nor would the restoration of the right to organize (which is de facto dead in the United States) fully protect the rights of immigrants who work in the caring and service sectors. The Left must push for an immediate path to citizenship for all those who work in our society (and for their dependents).

There are no inevitabilities in politics. But whenever capitalism failed to produce security for ordinary people, workers and their allies used their democratic rights to push for what they needed. They forced political elites to enact public policies that decommodified, or removed from the market, such basic human needs as old-age retirement, disability, and unemployment insurance. Under pressure from below, FDR created 3 million jobs in just three months in 1933, the equivalent of 9 million jobs today. That's why socialists must not only educate the public about the systemic causes of the crisis of global capitalism, but also help win victories that enhance the lives of the working class, poor and unemployed.

Take for example health care. The very imperfect bill that finally passed only starts us down the road to truly universal, affordable health care coverage. But we won't move much down that path unless the Left continues to fight with the private insurers, Big Pharma, and private hospitals over how to make that social right truly universal and affordable. Absent the eventual creation of a strong public option (or, preferably, strong state-level single-payer systems that eventually evolve into a national single-payer system), this important victory against the right could turn out to be somewhat pyrrhic. Defeats demoralize; they do not empower. So do pyrrhic victories. On balance, progressives had

to hold their nose and back the Obama-Pelosi bill. Just as Clinton retreated to the center-right after 1994, so would the Obama administration after the 2010 elections if no bill had passed. But given the high level of unemployment the Democrats will lose a substantial number of House and Senate seats in November 2010. Only reinvigorated anti-corporate organizing at the grassroots level will convince Democratic national party elites to conclude after the Congressional elections that the party needs to move to the left and not to the center.

Whatever the outcome of the long-term struggle for affordable and truly universal health care coverage, DSA and YDS should today be out in the streets joining movements fighting for an extension of unemployment and COBRA benefits and for public jobs programs (targeting the location of and training for green jobs in inner cities and de-industrialized communities). Socialist bashing is, per usual, being wielded by the Right against any reform that would modestly limit the prerogatives of corporate capital. But many Americans understand that there is no way out of this crisis without strengthening the democratic state's ability to fund public education, health care, and affordable housing.

The United States needs a mass movement for full employment, but it also needs bodies in the streets and in the legislative halls demanding the re-regulation of finance capital so it serves the interests of the productive economy rather than the interests of the speculators. Anti-banking sentiment can and has taken either a progressive or reactionary racist and antisemitic populist form. Until the Left dominates the movement to bail out Main Street rather than Wall Street, racist forms of populism will continue to grow.

The level of popular resistance to injustice is nowhere near that of the early 1930s or early 1960s, but no generation of radicals is promised favorable terrain or the best of troops. The classic leftist adage of "educate, agitate, and organize" makes as much sense now as it did in the past. The struggle to use the power of the democratic state to render the market a servant of society and not its master won't be won just by thinking big thoughts. Today's radicals can become as relevant to today's politics as they were to the politics of the 1930s and 1960s, but we have to be willing to engage in direct action and protest politics alongside communities that are suffering the brunt of the Great Recession. Being content to sit at a computer and click on e-mail appeals from MoveOn.Org or Organizing for America won't cut it in confronting the greatest crisis in global capitalism since the 1930s. ♦

*Joseph M. Schwartz is a professor of political science at Temple University and a national vice-chair of DSA. His most recent book is The Future of Democratic Equality: Rebuilding Social Solidarity in a Fragmented America (Routledge Press, 2009).*

# YDS Conference: REAL Change for a change

by Rebecca Kanter and Sean Monahan

On the weekend of March 5-7, over a hundred young radicals from around the country descended on Manhattan for the Young Democratic Socialists' 2010 national conference, *Democratic Socialism: REAL Change for a Change*. The title of the event played to the mood of the young American Left. After enduring eight agonizing years of the Bush presidency, many, led on by Obama's talk of "change" and terrified of a McCain-Palin White House, organized for the Democrats in the 2008 election. Meanwhile, most of the "hope" we were promised has been dashed. Early warning signs came in the President's cabinet appointees, with economic advisers from the neo-liberal Clinton and even Reagan administrations. Since being sworn in, Obama chose not to close Gitmo or end torture, not to withdraw from Iraq, to ramp up the war in Afghanistan, not to end "Don't Ask Don't Tell," not to regulate Wall Street and instead give them \$700 billion (at least), not to protect households in foreclosure, not to include single-payer in the health care debate...essentially he has not done anything we were hoping for. His administration has not meant change, and the American people continue to slide into poverty while the capitalists get richer and more powerful.

In this context, many young people are questioning the Democratic Party establishment for the first time, and many are looking for a way to get organized. Enter the Young Democratic Socialists, bringing DSA's radical reformist political platform and focus on pragmatic organizing to college campuses around the country, and offering (as the conference title suggests) REAL change for a change.

The first plenary session opened with Steve Max, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) vice-chair and longtime community organizer and co-author of the *Midwest Academy Manual, Organizing for Social Change*; and one of Glenn Beck's favorite targets, Frances Fox Piven, the renowned sociologist and author of *Regulating the Poor* and *Poor People's Movement*. Max addressed one of the great dilemmas of being a democratic socialist: how many hours does one spend trying to improve things under capitalism versus speaking out on socialist principles? This, he said, distinguishes democratic socialists from liberals, who do not criticize; and from revolutionary "socialists," who see reforms as futile. He urged the young activists to spend more time discussing socialism and why liberal reforms are not equivalent, "for if this is not made clear, liberal initiatives will never pass."

But "disappointment with the Obama administration is beside the point," said Piven. She argued that meaningful reforms will only occur under his presidency if and when there is mass social pressure from below. Piven held that the Left cannot win with a strategy that empowers communication much more than mobilization for protests and disruptions. She

reminded the assembled young radicals, "activists can make a difference. Giving people courage and confidence and defiance is not something to be ashamed of, but something the country needs."

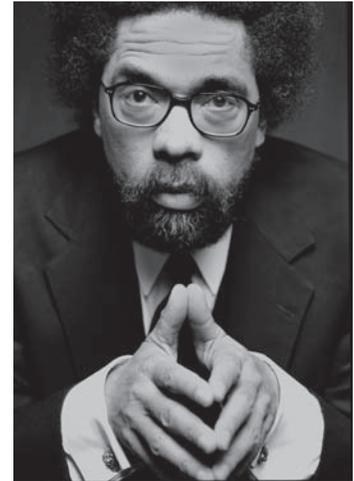
"Hope in each other as one struggles against the grain" would sustain our activism, according to DSA national chair Cornel West, who addressed a crowd of 300 on Saturday's opening plenary. West took the stage to a roaring auditorium and

was tempted, he said, to start break dancing – which he sadly did not. He did, however, give us a little hope, but not without great caution. "Instead of a politics of fear, [we need a] politics of hope. Hope is serious work, don't confuse it with optimism. No optimism for 'blues people.' There is no cheap optimism for young democratic socialists. Hope is much deeper; it has to do with struggle, it has to do with cutting against the grain. It has to do with being wounded, but choosing to be a wounded healer, rather than a wounded hurter...Hope is a blues thing."

Before hope comes love; or so brother West implied. Imperative to being a democratic socialist is having a love for all people, he asserted. West urged YDSers to issue the following challenge to American society: "Can we treat workers, can we treat poor people, the way we treat investment bankers?"

Two dynamic feminist professors, authors, activists, and moms, Christine Kelly and *Nation* contributor Liza Featherstone, led the third plenary session of the 2010 Young Democratic Socialists of America conference. Featherstone made clear that we must see the campus [of public higher education] as a battleground for struggle. She pointed out that "[Heck], the recent March 4th protests [against tuition increases] were even covered by the mainstream media!"

Currently, both Kelly and Featherstone suggested, public education in America is weak and sickly, or "totally physically decaying," as Featherstone put it. Higher education is draining family incomes. Federal Pell grants have been cut substantially. There is an increased charter school movement competing with public K-12 education – which inevitably "fuels cynicism about the public sector and makes it harder to fight for anything else." And constantly



Cornel West

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lurking right around the corner is the unregulated and highly exempt student loan industry. Together, both massive debt and tuition increases and the inherent partnership between the two, makes the fight for sound loan and public higher education practices even more important. Featherstone urged us to struggle for “an economic bill of rights for young Americans, in which there should be a universal right to higher education.” “You [young people] are cooler than we were,” Kelly said. But we cannot, she told us, keep financing our education with our future and our children’s future and our parents’ future. “The privatization of public higher education is the defining fight of [your] generation.”

Joseph M. Schwartz, DSA vice-chair and author of *The Future of Democratic Equality*, opened the Sunday afternoon plenary on “Progressive Responses to the Global Economic Crisis.” According to Schwartz, the current “Great Recession” is a culmination of 30 years of global neo-liberal capitalism. The neo-liberal attack on the “social contract” of the post-World War II era began in the 1970s, when transnational corporate elites decided that democratic social movements were becoming too powerful, threatening capitalist profit. Thus began neo-liberal policies of “deunionization, deregulation, and privatization” of public goods. Schwartz argued that with the outsourcing of basic industrial production to non-union areas and the developing world, corporate America increasingly invested at home in “FIRE” – finance, insurance and real estate. Thus, the “booms” of the 1980s, 90s and the first millennial years were “asset bubbles,” rather than a growth in real productive capacity that served human needs.

With the collapse of the financial speculative bubble, not just working people are losing their homes and exhausting their unemployment benefits, so is the middle class. Schwartz contended that unless social protest against the federal government bailing out banks rather than homeowners grows, we will not see a meaningful government response to the housing and unemployment crises. “People [in foreclosure] should have the right to rent homes at the market price,” he said, while advocating a federal program that would force banks to “cram down” mortgage debt to the current market value of homes. Schwartz held that the right attacked ACORN because of its national role in organizing a multi-racial coalition that resisted foreclosure. The trade union movement must organize both the employed and the unemployed. But this is difficult because absent real labor law reform “there is no right to organize in the U.S., and there is a war on trade union rights across the globe.” Schwartz, alluding to DSA’s new “Economic Bill of Rights” project, urged students to defend public education as part of the Left’s historic effort to “de-commodify” basic human needs and fund these public goods through progressive taxation.

Bertha Lewis, CEO of ACORN, and Dan Cantor, executive director of the New York Working Families Party, spoke alongside Schwartz.

Lewis started out her speech applauding the audience. “I give you all a hand because saying ‘I’m young and democratic and a socialist’ is a good thing to do; and no light thing to do in this time.” And then she fervently began: “We are in it right now... This is for real;” alluding to the scent of McCarthyism and racism that wafts in the right-wing populist air.

“Economic crisis...What crisis?” Lewis loudly asked. “We have always been in a crisis,” she exclaimed, “this is NOT NEW!” While this may be a crisis for [the elites], we have always been in a crisis if we are poor, working class, and/or people of color, Lewis explained. Moreover, Lewis questioned how the global corporations can still have lots of money and give out big bonuses. “How blatant do they have to be?” she asked. This is “one instance where size does not matter,” for no bank or corporation should be giving or receiving bonuses.

Thus, Lewis urged us to knock on doors, and organize, rather than just advocate for the oppressed. She also urged us to not depend on the kindness of strangers (e.g. foundations, philanthropies) and to work on building an organization that is self-sufficient and gets into real battles. Lewis believes that the next real battle coming in the United States will be around immigration. As we are “getting ready to have a majority planet of color,” this is how the “fear of the black planet is being played out today.” “The face of immigration needs to be blacker than it is,” proclaimed Ms. Lewis. “Second and third generation blacks here in the U.S. are not marching with other [more recent immigrants]. They need to say ‘I am an immigrant too!’”

When someone asked, “how I, as a white woman, could help fuel this renewed black movement that she spoke of,” Ms. Lewis passionately responded, “Organize white women! Black people need to organize themselves. Keep it simple and organize what you know and then join together, which will just make attacks stronger. This is how you help us and we help you.”

Dan Cantor then spoke about the 12-year-old Working Families Party of New York (WFP-NY). Cantor promotes the WFP-NY because it a “unique and powerful way to make non-violent change.” The WFP-NY is an example of a fusion voting system, where two parties (a minority and a majority), endorse the same candidate and aggregate their votes. (This is only possible in six states, in one of which, Connecticut, the WFP is currently organizing.) Cantor believes that if one “really wants power one has to scare, not influence, the influentials.” He also wanted us to understand that there are “no shortcuts to doing the work that we do.”

The closing speaker, prominent literary critic Gayatri Spivak (who also runs a rural public school in one of the poorest regions of India), affirmed the importance of language and reminded us that the struggle for democracy and freedom would not end with the abolition of capitalism (which she affirmed would come someday). The socialist movement, she argued, must be global and internationalist or it will not be a movement at all.

The conference was a resounding success for YDS from an organizational standpoint. In attendance were over 100 young socialists representing 49 campuses and 26 states, from Rutgers in New Jersey to Wichita State University in Kansas, to the University of Oregon. This conference introduced to the national organization the new chapters at Temple University and Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA, and at Sam Houston State University in Texas, while reuniting all of the old favorites as well. Fourteen unaffiliated YDSers said they are interested in forming a new chapter on their own campus or in their own community. Many of them are

new faces on the YDS scene (a couple of which have already begun to organize in the few weeks since). The conference brought together a growing community of young radicals from around the country, many of whom will see each other again in Detroit at the US Social Forum in June, and again in New York at the national YDS summer retreat in early August. As Dan Cantor urged, it is time we think critically about new terms and language as eloquent and simplistic as the “living wage;” but at the same time, be careful, do not get stunned by the “paralysis of analysis” (Lewis’ words) and go out there and organize! ♦

*Rebecca Kanter, a graduate student at John Hopkins, is a new member who attended the conference. Much of this article is taken from her posts about the conference on her blog at Alternet. Sean Monahan is the Greater Philadelphia Democratic Socialists of America, student organizer and the Young Democratic Socialists, northeast regional coordinator.*

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## DSA Values Bequests of all Sizes

Most people think that leaving a legacy gift that supports a cause is a choice that is only available to the very affluent. The truth is really quite different: the only time that most people have the capacity to make a significant gift to a cause they believe in is as a part of a legacy gift. That is because unless you are already very affluent, or receive a windfall, most of your time and resources go to just getting by or slightly ahead.

That is why it is important that all of us make arrangements to remember Democratic Socialists of America. A will or living trust should be part of everyone’s life plan and once established, it should be reviewed on a regular basis. A sentence or two in your will or living trust can help promote DSA’s work and our socialist values:

*“I give to the Democratic Socialists of America, Inc. 75 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038 (insert cash amount) to be used for general purposes.”*

or

*“I give to the Democratic Socialists of America, Inc. 75 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038 (enter the word “all” or state a percentage) of the rest of my estate to be used for general purposes.”*

Wills and living trusts are legal mechanisms that usually require an attorney to set up. However, there are other kinds of legacy gifts that don’t require a lawyer. Many bank accounts including checking, money market, savings accounts and certificates of deposits have survivor provisions allowing you to designate a survivor who assumes ownership of the account after your death. Such gifts do not normally go through probate.

Life insurance policies also provide a mechanism to provide a legacy. It is possible to designate DSA as a beneficiary for a specific amount or a percentage of an insurance policy. Many of us have one or more insurance policies. Credit card companies, fraternal organizations, alumni associations and employers often offer policies that provide insurance. And of course many of us have larger policies that we purchase ourselves. And on every one we must designate a beneficiary or beneficiaries.

There is nothing that prevents you from designating DSA (always use our full legal name: **Democratic Socialists of America, Inc.**) as your beneficiary or one of your beneficiaries on a life insurance policy or as the survivor on a bank account.

Some estates require professional planning. This article is not intended as legal advice, which should only come from an attorney. DSA’s national office can assist anyone seeking general advice and can help you find professional advice should you require it. ♦

# DSA Honorary Chair Dolores Huerta Celebrates her 80th Birthday with Activism

By Duane E. Campbell

**D**SA Honorary Chair Dolores Huerta, along with Cesar Chavez, Philip Vera Cruz and others, created the United Farm Workers (UFW) union, the first successful union of farm workers in U.S. history. She can look back with satisfaction on this accomplishment and many more as she celebrates her 80th birthday on April 10, 2010.

Each of the prior attempts to organize farm worker unions was destroyed by racism and corporate power. Huerta and Chavez chose to build a union that incorporated the strategies of social movements and community organizing and allied itself with churches and students as well as other unions. The successful creation of the UFW changed the nature of labor organizing in the Southwest and contributed significantly to the growth of Latino politics in the U.S.

In 1965 the UFW launched a strike and national boycott against California grape growers who refused to recognize the union. Huerta became east coast coordinator of the boycott, a key to the success of the UFW in winning union contracts with the growers in 1970. Chavez said that Huerta “is totally fearless, physically and mentally.”

*“We showed the world that nonviolence can work to make social change...we have laid a pattern of how farm workers are eventually going to get out of their bondage”*

– Dolores Huerta

Today Mexican, Mexican American and Puerto Rican union leadership is common in our major cities and in several industries. Hundreds of activists in labor, community organizing and politics owe their skills to UFW training and experience. This trained cadre of organizers remains a major legacy of the UFW.

Dolores Huerta was long the vice-president of the UFW and its chief negotiator of contracts, as well as the primary advocate for farm worker rights in the California legislature. Huerta continues her important education and organizing work today. She is the president of the Dolores Huerta foundation, a 501(c)(3) “non-profit organization whose mission is to build active communities working for fair and equal access to health care, housing, education, jobs, civic participation and economic resources for disadvantaged communities with an emphasis on women and youth.” The foundation was started with funds received from a settlement after she was assaulted and severely injured by police at a 1988 anti-war demonstration in San Francisco and beaten so severely her spleen had to be removed.

Huerta has long been known for her political activism. She was recruited into DSOC (predecessor of DSA) by Michael Harrington. She serves on the board of People for the American



Dolores Huerta at California State University – Sacramento.

Way and the Feminist Majority Foundation as well as being active within the Democratic Party. She speaks frequently at colleges, universities, and high schools from a Latina activist, feminist perspective, which is particularly valuable for young women in school and community groups. She is a recognized leader in civil rights and immigration issues.

Huerta openly acknowledges her socialism in her speeches, although being a socialist has some down sides. In March of this year the Texas Board of Education held hearings and adopted (over protest) new history /social studies guidelines that moved the textbook selection process of Texas significantly to the right. According to testimony by board members, Dolores Huerta was targeted for exclusion from the Texas version of history because she is a known socialist – a member of DSA. We are honored by her membership in our organization and wish her a very happy birthday. ♦

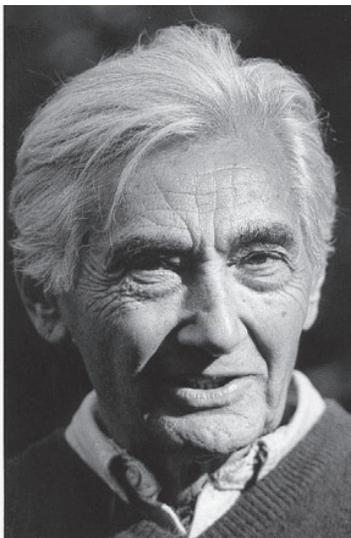


# Howard Zinn 1922-2010

By Steve Shalom

The outpouring of tributes, remembrances, and expressions of grief at the death of Howard Zinn should come as no surprise. He touched – and profoundly influenced – so many people in so many ways, people who in turn have contributed to the arduous but essential process of creating a better world.

Given the extraordinary success and value of his *A People's History of the United States*, it is often forgotten that Howard's first book, *LaGuardia in Congress*, received an honorable mention for the Beveridge Award for the best book in American history. And it was at his first teaching position, at Spelman College half a century ago, that he played an important mentoring role to students who were working to desegregate the South. (His book *SNCC: the New Abolitionists* chronicles some of this great struggle.)



Howard Zinn

At Spelman (before they fired him for supporting civil rights protests) and at Boston University for two and a half decades, Zinn taught and advised thousands of students and moved them to think deeply about their role in the world and to see themselves as the makers of history. His lectures on anarchism and Marxism drew overflow crowds, crowds who knew they wouldn't get a party line, but a subtle appreciation mixed with humor and critical insights. The

same was true of his plays – especially “Emma and Marx in Soho” – which evoked laughter and tears from audiences.

His book, *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*, laid out with remarkable clarity the case against the U.S. war on Indochina and what needed to be done. Along with the collections of documents that we in the antiwar movement invariably referred to, Howard's book was the crucial resource on every activist's bookshelf. Likewise, his essays on dissent and disobedience were a manual for the nonviolent protest movement. And his reflections on his own role as a bomber pilot in World War II helped so many of us grapple with the moral issues of war and peace.

Howard went beyond the button that said “Question Authority.” Question it, yes, but if you find it illegitimate – as so much authority is – then resist it.

This wasn't just the lesson of his writings and his lectures: this was the lesson of his life. Howard didn't just inspire movements, he was part of them. When there was a march to be marched, Howard was there. When there was a Pentagon leaker to be hidden, Howard and his wife Roz did the hiding. When there were calls to oppose wars in Central America, occupation in Palestine, racial and gender oppression, human rights violations, or the exploitation of workers – whether in far-away factories or on his own campus – Howard rallied to the cause. And when there were small groups getting set up or activists needing advice, Howard was there for them too. He was there with his courage, good humor, and irrepressible optimism. Beyond his personal warmth, it was this optimism that always kept his smile glowing.

His *People's History* and its various spin-offs have been earthshaking in their impact. Through them, countless people have come to look at the world in a new way. No more is history the private preserve of princes, politicians, and plutocrats. It is within our power to change the world, and change it we must.

In 2005, Howard was invited to Spelman College to give the commencement address there 42 years after he had been fired. He told the graduates

*My hope is that you will not be content just to be successful in the way that our society measures success; that you will not obey the rules, when the rules are unjust; that you will act out the courage that I know is in you....*

*...you don't have to do something heroic, just something, to join with millions of others who will just do something, because all of those somethings, at certain points in history, come together, and make the world better.*

It may seem odd to sing the praises of someone who all his life has championed the thousands of unnamed people who make history. But every so often from the people there emerges an individual who embodies the greatest strengths of the people at their very best: their spirit, their integrity, their hopes, their courage, their intelligence, and their compassion.

Such an individual was Howard Zinn.

He will be deeply missed. ♦

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# Labor's Star Vicky Starr

by Bob Roman

**D**SA member/activist Vicky Starr's life as a union organizer and co-founder of the United Packinghouse Workers, first in the slaughterhouses in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhoods in the 1930s and 40s, made her a touchstone for many authors and a star of the Oscar-nominated documentary, "Union Maids." Accounts of her life are referenced in dozens of books, including Studs Terkel's bestseller *The American Dream*, the Lynds' *Rank and File*, Howard Zinn's and Anthony Amove's *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, Judith Kegan Gardiner's *Provoking Agents*, and *First Person America* by Ann Banks – and this is hardly a complete Starr bibliography. Organizing slaughterhouses required extraordinary, even downright conspiratorial efforts. Union meetings were held in secret and new attendees needed to be vouched for by older members; simply to breathe the word "union" was to bring instant dismissal from your job and blacklisting. But because the workers were willing to grab control of production in a time-critical industry, they were able to win concrete victories and ultimately union recognition. Rick Halpern's book, *Down on the Killing Floor*, describes Starr's experience. Sadly, Vicky Starr died last Thanksgiving Day in Evanston, Illinois at age 93.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Vicky helped to organize clerical workers at the University of Chicago into Local 743 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. She was also an active member of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. Under the name Stella Nowicki, Vicky Starr was, along with Sylvia Wood and Katherine Hyndman, one of the stars of "Union Maids," a documentary (available from New Day Films) about female union organizers in the 1930s. This 1978 Academy Award-nominated film also won a blue

ribbon at the American Film Festival, and was shown on public television. Her participation in this documentary was a sweet spot in Vicky's life, and she took every opportunity to accompany screenings with a personal presentation to bring the struggles of the past to life and make them an inspiration for people struggling today.

My acquaintance with Vicky Starr came late in her life, years after DSA was formed through the merger of the New American Movement (NAM) and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC). Vicky had been a member of NAM while I had been a member of DSOC. When we finally had the opportunity to work together, I observed that being an organizer often requires, among other things, a certain boldness combined with many of the interpersonal skills that characterize a good party host. Being a bureaucrat requires, among other things, a talent for systematic mastery of information and record keeping. Vicky Starr could do either or both and do it well. She was formidable.

Vicky Starr was honored with a Debs-Thomas-Harrington Award at an event that featured fellow DSA member and then Screen Actors Guild President Ed Asner, and keynote speaker Congressman Lane Evans. In the years since, she remained a faithful patron of the dinner, attending nearly every one. If Vicky Starr helped change the meat packing industry and advanced the organizing of female white collar workers a generation later, the experience also changed her in many ways, major and minor. On one occasion when she organized a DSA mailing party, she absolutely forbade anyone to lick an envelope or a stamp. "You wouldn't dare," she said, "if you saw how that glue was made." ♦

Bob Roman is a charter member of DSA and edits *New Ground*, Chicago DSA's newsletter.

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