

# USA: In Defense of the Rank-and-File Strategy

Saturday 29 June 2019, by [MOODY Kim](#) (Date first published: 26 June 2019).

**Unions are schools of workers' struggle — that's why socialists talk so much about them. But they're also contradictory institutions that often become complacent and bureaucratic. That's why the rank-and-file strategy is so important.**

It is a very positive development to see the idea of rank-and-file union work so widely discussed by DSA members, in *Jacobin* and elsewhere. As part of this discussion, Luke Elliott-Negri [recently wrote](#) on *Jacobin* that the “rank-and-file strategy” described by both [Barry Eidlin](#) and myself in the 2000 Solidarity pamphlet “[The Rank-And-File Strategy](#)” was not a strategy at all, but simply one tactic socialists can deploy in their union work.

As presented in the 2000 Solidarity pamphlet, the strategy involved in rank-and-file union work referred to two aspects of socialist political work that are too long-range in nature to be reduced simply to one of a number of tactics. At the same time, there is an important theoretical and practical thread that connects rank-and-file union and workplace work with a Marxist approach to political work generally: the centrality of independent, working-class self-activity and self-organization that is the political DNA of Marxism and “[socialism from below](#).”

Socialists are enthusiastic supporters of organized labor and unions, which play a central role in advancing the interests and conditions of the working class. They are, as Marx and Engels argued, the “natural organizations” of the working class, schools of workers' democracy, an expression of the class struggle itself. At the same time, we recognize that unions as they have evolved are complex and contradictory institutions. The elements of democracy and combat with capital cannot be taken for granted. It is in this context that the rank-and-file strategy is relevant.

## Getting Rooted in the Workforce

The first aspect of the rank-and-file strategy, which is addressed in the beginning of the 2000 Solidarity pamphlet, is a way of overcoming the isolation of socialists and the socialist movement in general from the actually existing working class, its struggles and daily life. This would be accomplished first by socialists taking working-class jobs for a long period of time, often a lifetime.

Many DSAers and today's “downwardly mobile millennials” are already doing this in areas such as education, logistics, health care, “gig work,” etc. But more than that, the rank-and-file strategy proposes a specific framework and approach to union work that differs from that of other leftists who have attempted to influence union practice at its highest levels by simply cozying up to the union leadership in one way or another, in hopes of influencing them politically. These “permeationist” approaches have been used historically by the Communist Party in the 1930s and in DSA and its precursors under the leadership of Michael Harrington in the context of the “[realignment](#)” strategy of the 1970s and 1980s.

The rank-and-file strategy, in contrast, is about grassroots organization and actions based primarily

in the workplace (though not confined there) in order to build genuine workers' power in the conflict with capital and to fight to transform the bureaucratic nature of the union, transcend its narrow bargaining limits to fight for broad working-class issues, fight the racial and gender divisions with the workforce, combat the pro-capitalist business union ideology and practice of most of the US labor bureaucracy, and raise the consciousness of union members about their place in capitalist society and the power they possess collectively.

The democratic, collectivist, and independent class politics of the rank-and-file strategy opposes the ideology and practice of bureaucratic business unionism that affects most US unions to one degree or another. In this alone, it is far more than a tactic.

Business unionism takes capitalism for granted, sees collective bargaining as a form of junior partnership in the administration of the business, and proposes to leave the "big decisions" to the leaders who, it is presumed, "know better" — even where those leaders use more creative mobilizing tactics or have more liberal social views.

This has become more important in the neoliberal era as the practice of "junior partner" to capital became even more explicit with the introduction by management and widespread acceptance by union leaders of "labor-management cooperation" and "team concept" schemes beginning in the 1980s. Socialists — through rank-and-file movements such as [Teamsters for a Democratic Union](#) (TDU) and [New Directions](#) in the United Auto Workers, many local-level caucuses, and *Labor Notes* — opposed these programs, making the fundamental conflict between labor and capital explicit. Thus, the rank-and-file strategy is political not only in the sense of contesting the power of capital and the union bureaucracy, but in presenting an alternative class view of the conflict between labor and capital that cannot be reduced to the rituals of collective bargaining.

This rank-and-file approach itself deploys many tactics: petitions over key issues, contract campaigns to push the leadership into more effective action, building stewards' organization, publishing local or even union-wide newsletters or papers, forming rank-and-file caucuses, running for (mostly local) office when there is a solid base of support, directly contesting the authority of the bureaucracy, taking direct action (like strikes or work-to-rule) against the employer with or without official blessing when appropriate, organizing educational and training sessions, using resources such as *Labor Notes* or the Association for Union Democracy in the fight to transform unions, and so on.

Tactics can be flexible. For example, supporting an opposition candidate who is not directly part of the caucus, as TDU did in the case of reformer [Ron Carey in 1991](#) and [Fred Zuckerman and Teamsters' United in 2016](#).

This strategy is based on two material aspects of unionism in the United States.

### **Union Bureaucracy, Worker Rebellion**

The first is the contradictory nature of unions as bureaucratic organizations, in which the leadership and their hired staff are positioned between the pressures of capital and the needs of the members, and thus develop distinct interests from those members in holding their positions in the bureaucracy. This further involves controlling the union's finances, property, and more; conducting the mostly top-down practice of collective bargaining in isolation from the membership as much as possible; typically dominating the union's approach to electoral politics and the choice of candidate endorsements; and, indeed, limiting their approach to elections to one of endorsements and funds for self-selected or party-selected candidates.

As a result, union democracy, which is essential to self-organization, is undermined.

All of this has tended to foster caution by leaders in using the power of the unions: above all, the power of the members on the job.

This is particularly true in the case of working conditions and the [intensification of labor](#) that is a fundamental piece of capitalist competitive strategy. It is often this pressure on the workforce that leads to frustration among the union members, which can express itself either in resignation or rebellion. Socialists in the ranks can [play a role in deciding](#) which of these dominates.

This isn't just a theoretical proposition, but a well-illustrated tendency in the history of most unions since the end of World War II. Of course, unions and their leaders differ on the degree to which they act with caution or militancy, their style of leadership, their level of social consciousness, and their effectiveness.

Recently, for example, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) adopted the unusual practice of consulting members about the endorsement of presidential candidates. Sometimes, even very conservative union leaders are forced by capital's offensive to take militant action. As Elliott-Negri [points out](#), some unions have a relatively strong record on striking or organizing.

One of the unions that does the most striking and more new organizing than most, on the other hand, is also one of the most bureaucratic and conservative — the Teamsters. Much the same can be said for the even more bureaucratic (though less socially conservative) Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Some smaller left-led unions or those led by rank-and-file reformers activate members and attempt to transcend business unionism with some success.

Despite the differences, the contradiction between bureaucratic norms and the needs and desires of most union members remains a reality far more often than not. As [one analyst put it](#), there is a contradiction between the union as institution and as social movement; that is, the union as worker self-organization.

The second material reality is that because of this contradiction, rank-and-file rebellions of various sorts have been a regular feature of American unionism at least since the early twentieth century.

Socialists who advocate the rank-and-file strategy are not just dreaming this up. The 2000 Solidarity pamphlet contains some of the history of these movements, as do several books, notably [Rebel Rank and File](#), which examines the 1960s and 1970s, and [The Transformation of U.S. Unions](#) for the 1980s and 1990s. More recent rank-and-file movements have been described in "Updating the Rank and File Strategy" in my book [In Solidarity](#). (And a [reading list on the rank-and-file strategy](#) has been compiled by DSA labor activist [Joe Allen](#).) Such movements don't occur in all unions all the time, but they do flare up with some regularity. Socialists have played a role in initiating some, but many arise due to the frustrations and actions of "ordinary" union members.

Elliott-Negri [notes](#) that some rank-and-file movements or caucuses run for union office and win. When they do, those who take office cease to be rank-and-filers by definition. True enough. What the rank-and-file strategy says about this is that it is important the rank-and-file caucus that took power not disband but maintain its links to the membership, and advise, support, and if necessary keep the reformed union leadership on course. The Chicago Teachers Union leaders, for example, have maintained their rank-and-file caucus, [CORE](#).

Naturally, things become more complicated and difficult as the new leaders confront the same problems, pressures, and enemies as those they threw out — who themselves often remain as an irritant to the new leaders. If the new leaders do not democratize the union, change its approach to

collective bargaining, activate the members as much as possible, educate the members, develop broader alliances, and continue and improve workplace and stewards' organization — that is, enhance the self-organization of the workers themselves — they will fail. That is why maintaining and expanding a grassroots caucus is essential.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with being a union staffer. Unions need them. Organizers in particular are important for growth in this era of shrinking membership. But working for the union is not a strategy or a tactic for transforming the labor movement.

While it is true that staffers can do good things and push for more creative tactics and better practices, their relationship to the members, the rank and file, is limited by the nature of most staff work and, more fundamentally, by the fact that they are employed by the leaders to carry out their policies. That is, objectively, and regardless of whatever good work they do, they are part of the union bureaucracy.

By definition, many staffers — such as researchers and organizers who move from campaign to campaign — cannot have a long-term, day-to-day relationship with the ranks, experience the relentless pressures of management felt by the ranks, lead unauthorized actions, or participate in opposition movements. They remain at a distance from the ranks by virtue of their position, even where they are sympathetic to a rank-and-file movement. In the context of most unions as they are today, bureaucratic even while formally democratic, trying to change things as a staff member is, regardless of one's intentions, another form of top-down politics — a form of permeation.

Obviously, this becomes a different question when a rank-and-file movement takes power in the union. Some of yesterday's opposition activists will have to take staff jobs as part of the process of transformation. Because some of the old bureaucratic pressures will remain, staffers should, however, be accountable to the members in concrete ways and remain part of the rank-and-file caucus, which can hold their feet to the fire if need be.

### **The Politics of the Rank-and-File Strategy**

The rank-and-file strategy is a potential political challenge to the politics of business unionism that has been one of the most debilitating features of the American labor movement since the days of Samuel Gompers's "pure-and-simple unionism," the precursor of modern business unionism, on the one hand, and its political expression in the AFL's "nonpartisan" political practice, on the other.

The Gompers/AFL "pure and simple unionism" and "nonpartisan" approach to electoral politics was not, as Elliott-Negri [seems to imply](#), a rejection of electoral politics similar to that of the IWW (or what he sees as the rank-and-file tactic), but an explicit rejection of support for independent class or socialist politics that were on the rise in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was only "nonpartisan" in that unions then sometimes supported "progressive" Republicans as well as Democrats. It was meant to keep the unions within the framework of mainstream capitalist politics.

And it was bitterly opposed by most socialists. Tragically, with few exceptions the business unionists ultimately defeated the socialists and preempted independent political action by labor, despite many efforts in that direction and a few temporary successes.

The movement of the CIO and most AFL union leadership formally into the Democratic Party coalition that was solidified in the 1930s during the New Deal has been a major source of labor's weakness, dependence, and pro-capitalist "interest group" self-image ever since. Because this political alliance or coalition is necessarily top-down — a negotiated coalition of officials,

officeholders, and funders — it reinforces the bureaucratic nature of the unions involved. At the same time, it “educates” the members to accept the limits of mainstream capitalist politics, undermining class consciousness.

This top-down approach, in combination with the failure of the Democrats to improve working-class living standards for the last half a century or more, is one reason why the union leadership cannot “deliver” the membership vote to the Democrats. Long before Trump captured union votes, since the end of World War II, about 40 percent of union household members more or less consistently voted Republican. (In only two elections since the end of World War II — 1948 and 1964 — did the union household vote for the Democratic presidential candidate reach 80 percent. In the rest it hovered around 60 percent.)

The Democratic stranglehold on the union leadership is part and parcel of the business union ideology and practice that undermines labor’s independence and power on the job and in the political arena. It is the opposition of rank-and-file movements to business unionism’s ideology and practice and the building of independent worker self-organization that provides the transition, the bridge from this political dependence to the idea of independent working-class electoral politics.

As I have argued in [On New Terrain](#), however, in today’s context, electoral action itself is generally a poor way to build permanent working-class organization given its emphasis on limited periodic mobilization, focus on individual candidates, and dependence on money rather than ongoing grassroots organization. Far more often than not, it is grassroots organization that can form a bridge to effective electoral action. Rank-and-file union work and transformed unions are not the only forms of such grassroots organization, but they offer a unique potential for class-based power in the face of the deeply institutionalized force of America’s predominantly two-party system.

In this regard, the proposition that the Democratic (or Republican) Party is nothing more than the “state-regulated *electoral system*” simply providing ballots and booths for voters, or even that the ability of party leaders to raise funds does not stem from “their formal role in party organization,” as Elliott-Negri [argues](#), is seriously mistaken and underestimates what socialists face in the electoral field. Of course, candidates themselves raise lots of money and PACs and Super PACs also pour funds into elections. If, however, Elliott-Negri is right about leaders in their formal party roles, how is it that the national Democratic Party, through its (formal) internal committees, raised and spent \$1.3 billion in the 2016 presidential election cycle and nearly \$1 billion (\$952,677,501) in the 2018 off-year election cycle — much of it from business and wealthy donors, and very little from labor? This 2018 figure was more than the \$808,703,796 all the Super PACs combined spent in that election cycle for and against candidates of all parties.

The Democratic National Committee (DNC), which has been described by *US News* as a “[sprawling bureaucracy](#)” and sits atop the hierarchy of party bureaucracies, raised \$180 million alone in the 2018 cycle for its activities. These figures for party spending do not include money raised by candidates or their campaign committees or PACs, Super PACs, dark money, or other outside money. It is money raised and spent by the formal party apparatus and its leaders to support the national party organizations, state parties, and selected candidates favored by the national, state, and congressional party leaders.

The idea that the Democratic Party at various levels has no more capacity to intervene in elections than DSA or even the Working Families Party is simply wrong. For those who win office as Democrats, furthermore, the party they will enter is also an elite social and organizational milieu in which party leaders, politicians, capitalists, their lobbyists, top labor leaders, big NGO heads, government officials, consultants, and many others mingle in search of legislation, favors, jobs, money, and influence out of the sight and reach of almost everyone else.

While the old machines are gone and local party organizations are not grassroots organizations, the national party provides media and high-tech campaign expertise and assistance, funds, and — along with the state and local party organizations — frequently intervenes in candidate selection. Much of the past grassroots election mobilization in which unions often participated has been replaced by the party hierarchy as well as by candidates with high-tech voter targeting. This algorithm-driven campaign method reduces the need for mobilization and targets those most likely to vote: the middle class.

As a result, today's Get Out the Vote efforts are more likely to take place on the phone, internet, or over social media than on the doorstep or at the union hall. All of which means power and resources are primarily in the hands of incumbent candidates and party structures.

To be sure, the party apparatus and leaders don't always get their way in the primaries or win in the general elections. But they do have a great deal of capacity, personnel, resources, and money with which to support candidates and provide or hire consultants, PR experts, tech operatives, and media firms in order to intervene — and they do so regularly.

The corrupting influence of all of this on the unions and their members through the long-standing incorporation of the leaders into the party coalition is one reason why the rank-and-file strategy points toward independent political action rather than reinforcing labor's subordination to and dependence on the institutionalized, pro-capitalist, cross-class coalition that is the Democratic Party. It is not for nothing that Democratic politicians from Nancy Pelosi to Elizabeth Warren have recently stated that they are capitalists.

Thus, the rank-and-file approach to union work points toward a broader strategy for achieving socialism that involves many kinds of grassroots organizations, and toward independent working-class political (direct as well as electoral) action, the thorny question of the type of socialist organization(s) ultimately needed to carry out the strategy and bring about socialism, and the relationship of such organization to the broader working class and its various racial, national, and gender components. What holds this overall approach together is the centrality of independent working-class self-activity and self-organization that has always been at the center of Marxist theory and practice.

Where this thread does not run consistently through socialist strategy, as it all too often has not, the socialist movement loses its natural social base, its democratic character, its political bearings, and its electoral effectiveness, not to mention the power it needs to triumph in the long run. This has generally been the trajectory of both communist and social-democratic parties in much of the developed world, at least since the end of World War II and certainly during the neoliberal era.

Elliott-Negri's [attempt](#) to patch together the rank-and-file strategy (reduced to a tactic) with working within the bureaucracy and engaging in electoral politics as Democrats (only for a while, of course) into an eclectic strategy simply bundles together many of the contradictions that face socialists attempting to work in the working class today. This, it seems to me, is not only bad "strategy," but, despite obvious contemporary differences, a step back toward the bad old (stagnant) days of DSOC/DSA's subordination to liberal labor leaders and what passed for the "progressive" wing of the Democratic Party back then. This is not a place today's major US socialist organization should move toward.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kim Moody is a co-founder of Labor Notes. He is the author of numerous books about the American labor movement, including *On New Terrain: How Capital Is Reshaping the Battleground of Class*

War.

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