

# What strategy for labour in the US?

## #HM2018

Friday 16 November 2018, by [ALLISON Ian](#), [BHATTACHARYA Tithi](#), [BLANC Eric](#), [MOODY Kim](#), [POST Charles](#) (Date first published: 13 November 2018).

**The USA has seen rapid growth of socialist organisation in the wake of Bernie Sanders's campaign and a wave of education strikes. Ian Allinson reports from a debate at the Historical Materialism Conference (London, 8-11 November 2019) about strategy for the US labour movement, with useful lessons for the UK. The speakers were Eric Blanc, Tithi Bhattacharya, Kim Moody and Charles Post.**

Recent education strikes have shown activists channel the energy behind Bernie Sanders's campaign into workplace organising, feeding new debates within political organisations such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). In Thursday's discussion at HM, the speakers discussed how this revealed the potential for socialists and the labour movement to reconnect. They raised a whole series of further strategic questions. How can education strikes be understood in terms of social reproduction theory? What are the vulnerabilities of modern capital? How can potential power in industries such as logistics be turned into actual power? Where should socialists focus their efforts?

In [2018, a wave of education strikes](#) began in West Virginia and then spread across a number of states controlled by Trump supporters. **Eric Blanc** explained how the wins varied but included pay rises for public sector workers (not just teachers), increases in education funding, more progressive taxation, blocking conservative attacks on education policy, and shifting the narrative about the causes of problems in education.

DSA members who had been part of Bernie Sanders's election campaign initiated the organising behind the West Virginia strikes. They drew inspiration from the Chicago teachers' successful 2012 strike. The latter had been led by activists who had organised by forming reading group and then taking up campaigning. In West Virginia, the activists started by reading [Jane McAlevey's "No Shortcuts"](#). The tremendous results of the strikes - more than the labour movement had achieved in decades - fed back into debates in the DSA, helping to make the case for the centrality of workplace organising. The DSA, previously a small group integrated in the Democratic Party and with the trade union bureaucracy grew rapidly to 50,000 members in the wake of Bernie Sanders's campaign and now contains everything from trade union bureaucrats to revolutionary socialists and anarchists. The DSA has been encouraging young members to take jobs in teaching and health to help organise, as well as inviting rank and file speakers from different industries to speak at their meetings.

US legislation fragments collective bargaining, making it hard to take on powerful employers. In many states, teachers don't have collective bargaining, and there are only 12 states where they have the right to strike. Many unions have responded by avoiding strikes and relying on lobbying including "social justice unionism". The recent strikes were illegal and state-wide. People made connections with Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement to justify breaking the law. The strikes were initiated and often led by the rank and file, outside union structures. The union bureaucracy

often followed, more so, when they were facing Republican rather than Democrat opponents. Facebook, despite all its limitations, played a vital role in rank and file organising and changing the relationship with the bureaucracy.

The strikes recruited thousands to the unions, and has begun to transform them, with new or enlarged rank and file groupings. Arizona Educators United, which now has 2000 “site liaisons” (reps), and is led by socialists, jointly organised the strike with the unions but went further than they could/would, given the strike’s illegality. Since the strikes, teachers have fought to maintain wearing red t-shirts in schools as an organising tool, but a lot of energy was sucked into the elections. The left has often written off Republican or Trump voters, but as the struggle radicalised people, a number of strikers posted apologies for having voted Republican, and the Democrats benefited electorally. There is talk of a strike in Democrat-controlled Los Angeles in January, which will be less comfortable for the bureaucracy, though taking the Democrats on at city level (as in Chicago) is less of a challenge than doing so nationally.

The role of socialists in leading the strikes became highly visible with red-baiting by the right, but instead of this working, it helped make socialism sound OK to many people. Eric felt that the strike wave had helped socialists and the labour movement to begin to reconnect with each other, strengthening both.

Eric highlighted some of the limitations of the strike wave. The strikes were “volcanic” and the level of rank and file organisation remains weak – struggling to sustain activism and political militancy after the strikes were over, which is a problem given the vicious counter-offensive expected from the right who try to pit public sector workers against the rest of the working class. Key to countering this is the push for progressive taxation (taxing the rich and corporations), a demand that was only won in some places, and for Medicare for all. Staging illegal strikes can help raise and popularise the argument for the right to strike, which some DSA candidates have raised, though Sanders hasn’t. Politically, the danger of co-option by the Democrats remains real. Going on the offensive against Charter schools (the equivalent of academies), which are common in Democrat controlled cities like LA, can help.

**Tithi Bhattacharya** set out how neoliberal policies of cutting education spending while reducing taxes had created a crisis in education. Many teachers have to take multiple jobs to cope with low pay. Meanwhile, physical infrastructure is crumbling, incessant testing and a narrow prescribed curriculum are burning teachers out or making them leave. Similar policies have contributed to a wave of teacher strikes including Algeria, Tunisia, many central and south American countries, and France (as part of wider public sector strikes).

Teaching, as a form of care-work or social reproductive labour, is a key area of employment for women. Teacher strikes have more impact now that women do more hours of waged work. Tithi mentioned Kim Moody’s work, which identified social reproductive work, the maintenance of fixed non-residential capital (workplace cleaning, security etc.) and logistics as areas of employment growth in the USA. Though many management methods (including “[Lean](#)” methods – see below) from manufacturing are being applied to intensify and social reproductive work, Tithi argued that the nature of the work makes it harder to measure and track speed-up.

Tithi addressed the debate about the strategic importance of different industries and occupations. Many on the left and the unions have focused on logistics which they argue has [structural workplace power](#) because of its place in the production value chain. But this kind of power is always *potential* power. A political process, which can’t be sectionalised to particular segments of the working class, is needed to use the potential power; an insurrectionary tendency is not necessarily inherent in the most structurally powerful groups. Tithi argued that schools and

hospitals are themselves “choke points” where many types of work and aspects of social reproduction meet. For example, schools often have to provide food, social services and healthcare. This, the nature of the work and its role in social reproduction partly explains why the teachers’ strikes attracted such wide support. The nature of caring jobs encourages workers to put people before profit.

Strikes involving so many women have a special political significance in a sexist society. The lack of a visible feminism of the left vacated the field for “lean in” feminism, which concentrates on how well women can do in existing society. This contributed to a tendency to see the racialised and gendered nature of the workforce and the issues it threw up as divisive issues which workers were initially reluctant to take up. Tithi argued a “class struggle feminism” was needed in the labour movement.

**Kim Moody** argued that the decline in US union membership was primarily a result of the decline in manufacturing employment, with unions responding through mergers to conceal their shrinkage rather than unionising newer parts of manufacturing.

The pattern of world trade has shifted dramatically, from domination by the US, EU and Japan, with 80% of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) between the most developed countries in the 1980s, to the rise of China and 50% of FDI going elsewhere. This has also meant significant changes in global trade routes, the inland components of which include vast amounts of fixed capital infrastructure in warehousing, trucking, rail, airports, docks and telecoms. This infrastructure includes huge clusters where routes meet. The fixed and embedded capital represents a major vulnerability of capital to workers. In addition, while production fled from major urban centres, these logistics clusters have to be near them to provide the necessary workers. Many logistics clusters, particularly round airports, include hotel clusters with large workforces doing gendered social reproductive work, albeit mainly for the middle class.

As a consequence, many people of colour have been moving into US suburbs that were previously white-dominated. Some areas have expanded so quickly that they have not been racially segregated. This is bad news for capital. The logistics clusters include some unionised elements such as UPS (parcel delivery) and rail, from which organisation could spread. Most of the industries involved in logistics have rank and file groupings, most notably in the Teamsters. Logistics relies heavily on telecoms and IT for coordination and workers sometimes understand this and the importance of its physical infrastructure. There have been several strikes in telecoms, notably a successful wildcat (unofficial) strike by about 9000 CWA members in the Midwest.

In meatpacking, the Teamsters union wouldn’t take up demands for Muslim workers to be allowed time to pray, leading to a wildcat strike which played a key part in a successful outcome after two years campaigning and legal battles. Kim argues that the imposition of a deal on UPS workers by the rotten leadership of the Teamsters union may result in further wildcat action. UPS provides the political centre for rank and file opposition, which almost won leadership elections (winning the vote in the USA but losing it in Canada). Though legal restrictions had impacted on strike levels, Kim argued that the US practice of reaching multi-year collective bargains (contracts) that included no-strike clauses for the duration of the contract had a much bigger impact. In the 1960s and 1970s, the unavailability of official strikes encouraged wildcat ones.

Wage labour has also expanded in social reproductive work, particularly education, health and elder-care. At the same time, this work has been industrialised and intensified. Lean production, worker tracking and algorithmic management are all being used, particularly in hospitals and hotels. Apart from teaching, healthcare regularly sees strikes, and there have been several recent strikes of hotel workers. Teachers have power to disrupt communities when they take action. Nurses have overcome

what is known as the “prisoner of love” dilemma – where care workers are reluctant to strike because of the impact on the people they care for. This took conscious effort, making an argument that though action might cost lives, not taking action was allowing poor services that killed people every day. Nursing is now the most strike-prone occupation in the US.

Kim highlighted other key vulnerabilities of capital covered in his most recent book, [On New Terrain](#). Logistics operates time-based competition, with companies vying to turn around goods as quickly as possible, making them very vulnerable to action, particularly given the prevalence of Just In Time systems with low or no stocks in much of industry. The pattern of divestments, mergers and acquisitions in recent decades involved corporations ridding themselves of functions and products they saw as peripheral to their core business, and a concentration and centralisation of capital within narrower product and service categories. This makes corporations more vulnerable to worker action in one business area, as it constitutes a bigger part of the overall business, less able to be supported by others.

To take advantage of the new vulnerabilities of capital, a new approach was needed. Breaking the law will be essential, as will be coordination between different groups of workers to ensure solidarity rather than action by one group impacting negatively on other groups. The most recent LaborNotes conference attracted over 3000 union activists – a sign that they are grappling with these questions. Kim welcomed the engagement of DSA activists with rank and file strategies, but emphasised that success depended on winning over existing workers, including those on the right, not just “salting” – the practice of activists taking particular jobs in order to organise. Workers change through struggle, particularly when there are socialists to point out connections.

**Charles Post** agreed with Tithi that structural power is always potential power and requires a political process to make it real. Lots of the recent strikes had socialists leading them, and the illegality of the strikes had been important. For too long unions had relied on a legal framework that didn’t deliver for workers. It is wrong to see the legal framework as determining struggle – it crystallises the results of previous struggles and influences present ones, but can be changed by it.

Unemployment in the USA is currently low, partly due to Trump’s spending. Many people, even in crap jobs, feel that they would be hard to replace, making workers feel more able to take action. However, the current economic position won’t last long, making the next few months crucial for rebuilding the militant minority and avoiding activists being sucked in to working for unions, where they would be agents for the bureaucracy.

The strategic questions raised by recent developments, and discussed in this session, have an increasingly urgent significance for our side and theirs.

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**Ian Allinson, Eric Blanc, Tithi Bhattacharya, Kim Moody and Charles Post**

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