

United States - The Key to the Key: A Socialist Feminist Rank-and-File Strategy

Wednesday 9 January 2019, by [BACKER David I.](#), [RONEN Shelly](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2018).

Kim Moody's "[Rank and File Strategy](#)" has influenced much of DSA's approach to labor organizing. To draw out what he calls socialist "class consciousness," Moody recommends fomenting member-led struggles in unions that advance self-empowerment. By joining "transitional organizations," or rank-and-file reform caucuses such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), he believes, workers gain experience directly confronting management over working conditions. These organizations prepare workers for larger fights to come.

As socialist feminists, we read Moody's text with a particular attention to social reproduction. Like [Lise Vogel](#), [Johanna Brenner](#), and [Sue Ferguson](#), we begin by asking, Who produces the worker? We know that the worker produces surplus value and profit for the capitalist, but how does the worker get ready for production? She must be fed and clothed. She must be raised to become an adult who is on time and ready to work.

If productive work is the key to capital accumulation, then reproductive work, or "care work," is the key to the key. How might this insight change how we evaluate the rank-and-file strategy? We believe it changes how DSA should understand and approach (1) strike tactics, (2) contract demands, (3) workplace issues, and (4) the prerequisites of socialist organizing.

- **Strike Tactics:** Taking reproduction as the key to the key of shutting down capital changes our tactics during union actions. Consider the West Virginia wildcat teachers' strike. As [Tithi Bhattacharya](#) and [Kate Doyle Griffiths](#) point out, two things that made this strike successful were teachers working with food pantries and soup kitchens to make hot meals for students, and coordinating with the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association so that school bus drivers joined the strike. After all, an efficient way of shutting down a school is by interrupting a reproductive function like transportation. But because many children depend on breakfast and lunch in schools, those reproductive functions have to be replaced to win the strike.

- **Contract Demands:** Since the 1970s, when employers jettisoned the "family wage," few families can get by on one wage earner's salary. And although we do not advocate for a return to the exploitation of women within the home, we do advocate that union strategists recognize that workers must be considered in their full contexts. What unionists fight for in their contracts must include more than so-called "bread and butter" issues. Workers need paid family leave, childcare, dependent healthcare coverage, and reproductive health benefits.

- **Workplace Issues:** Using a socialist feminist lens, the rank-and-file strategy makes it obvious that unions must take the lead in the fight against sexual harassment and assault. More women workers means gendered violence is a habitual part of working conditions. The #MeToo movement is a workers' movement, and we should fight in and with it as such.

- **Socialist Organizing:** This understanding of the rank-and-file strategy also highlights the importance of reproductive support such as childcare to build transitional organizations. Including caregivers in socialist meetings is essential to mobilizing the working class. [Pittsburgh's "Socialist](#)

[Sprouts” program](#) and the [Philly Childcare Collective](#) offer inspiring models. And because women and people of color do an outsized share of reproductive labor—often uncompensated—it follows that we must be class “expansivists,” not class reductionists. Moody takes this point seriously, citing Aimé Césaire: “I have a different idea of a universal. It is a [universal rich with all that is particular.](#)” Sometimes this insight gets lost in the DSA’s understanding of the strategy, but as the [Afrosocialists and Socialists of Color Caucus](#) reminds us, we must approach exploitation, white supremacy, and patriarchy as inseparable.

Workers make capitalism go, but it takes work to make workers. Social reproduction is the key to the key to fighting capitalism, and social reproduction feminism expands our understanding of labor to include everything that makes labor possible and therefore expands our understanding of Moody’s rank-and-file strategy.

Shelly Ronen and David I. Backer

P.S.

- Democratic Left. The Socialist Feminist Issue Winter 2018:

<https://democraticleft.dsausa.org/issues/winter-2018/the-key-to-the-key-a-socialist-feminist-rank-and-file-strategy/>

- Shelly Ronen is a member of the Socialist Feminist Working Group of Philly DSA. While at NYU, she was in a rank-and-file dissident caucus within GSOC-UAW Local 2110.

David I. Backer coordinates Philly DSA’s Childcare Brigade and is chair of the External Organizing Committee in West Chester University’s chapter of the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculty (APSCUF).