

The Rank and File Strategy on New Terrain

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Seventeen years after the release of Kim Moody's pamphlet [The Rank and File Strategy](#) for the socialist organization Solidarity, and two decades after Moody's then prescient assessment of the state of the working class, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* [1], his recent offering *On New Terrain: How Capital is Reshaping the Battlefield of the Class War* [2] comes at a crucial moment both for the socialist movement in the United States and for the growing influence within it of Moody's ideas. The book expands on most of his key insights, offers some crucial correctives to his earlier work, and once again establishes Moody's place as one of the most preeminent analysts of the composition of labor markets and labor process in the Anglophone left.

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Moody On Moody, Part 1: Preliminaries*

Here, I would offer that both a social reproduction theory (SRT) framework and deeper attention to the question of *socialist organization* can offer some insight into some of the most crucial tasks for a rank and file perspective today. In particular, a SRT framework helps us think concretely about the relationship between “consciousness” and “organization” raised in the original pamphlet, while signaling the aspects that are most urgent for us today.

THE RANK AND FILE STRATEGY

The two movements – the refinement of Moody's ideas, and the manner in which they are currently being taken up by a much more substantial slice of the socialist left – are often at odds. For this reason, it is necessary to take a moment to re-read *The Rank and File Strategy* in light of *On New Terrain*, as well as in the context of the developing practice of today's new wave of rank and filers located today not in Solidarity or in its predecessor organization, the International Socialists (IS), but in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), where it was recently adopted at their national convention in Atlanta. Once a moribund organization, the DSA has seen their membership explode and their political composition expand to encompass a fairly heterogeneous array of tendencies of socialist thought, including a number of experienced socialists, as well as a massive cohort of new and quite politically fluid young socialists.

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Though bigger, this layer, as with previous waves of rank and filers, is drawn largely from college educated and disproportionately downwardly mobile presumptively professional socialists, part of a radicalization that began with Occupy, among those increasingly aware of the diminished prospects for stable professional careers. For this reason, the rank and file strategy is still often practically posed as a document advocating for a version of “class suicide” that is articulated as a political strategy aimed at discerning the most effective targets for a small group of socialists hoping to make a large political impact. It is also seen as a viable personal strategy for building a life as a socialist that might avoid the isolation of academia, of paid organizer tracks for unions and NGOs, and the longstanding danger that youthful radicalism might give way to the conservatizing influences of traditional professional careers or the pressures of small business ownership.

As a pamphlet, *The Rank and File Strategy* has been a real workhorse of the socialist movement. When it was initially written, its influence was narrow but intense. It recast the legacy of IS industrialization in a form fit for its moment and swayed a small but important number of the now famously sparse “Generation X” socialists – inspired by Miners for Democracy, New Directions in the UAW, and reformers in the Steelworkers and Teamsters – to commit to taking rank and file union jobs in the hopes of organizing existing opposition caucuses and member-to-member networks. Their influence has taken shape, since then, in logistics (IBT), in transit (TWU), in longshore (ILA and ILWU), in rail, in auto (the UAW, unexpectedly, as a major player in academic unionization), and somewhat incidentally, in the unions representing teachers (AFT and NEA), nurses (NNU and NYSNA), hotels (UNITE-HERE), and more generally, unions including Communication Workers of America (CWA) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Many of them also took the tack of contributing to “transitional organizations” like Labor Notes or to caucuses, reform locals won through caucus struggles and elections, or by joining the staff of left-led participatory unions, particularly the CWA.

The Rank and File Strategy lays out the “the problem” quite convincingly, as a historically generated separation between the socialist left and the working class, as both a result and a determinant of the historic weakness of working-class institutions in the United States. A related problem in this text is the lack of a “sea” of class conscious workers in which socialists can “swim,” and thus “do” socialism. Consequently, the task was to help the tidal waves of local class activity converge into one common sea, at first in the form of a “militant minority” in and through “transitional organizations.” The latter included caucuses like Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), cross-union and cross-sectoral organizing, publication and education efforts such as *Labor Notes*, as well as formations that might promote “social movement unionism” like Jobs With Justice, organized through Central Labor Councils and under the auspices of “left”-led international unions and locals.

It must be pointed out that *The Rank and File Strategy* did not assert – in fact explicitly denied – that the workplace is the only or the most important source of workers’ consciousness, and it was this recognition that drove its vision of “social movement unionism.”

This was conceived as both reform locals lead by democratic insurgent caucuses, but also, in practice, the left-talking but internally undemocratic and highly top-down “bureaucratically militant” section of the organized labor movement, which would eventually split with the AFL-CIO union federation on the basis of a shared staff-driven organizing model, [Change To Win](#). This practice at the time reflected a deviation from Moody’s opposition to militants accepting staff jobs at top-down unions, but it was nevertheless common as a form of engagement with social movement unionism. While the two strategies were elaborated as diametrically opposed, organizations and groups of socialists didn’t always find them to be mutually exclusive in their practice.

Part of the explicit goal of these transitional organizations was to develop and cohere a minority of

unionists who are not only tactically militant but armed with a more comprehensive politics. Transitional organizations build concrete solidarity across unions and industries but also across the segregations of race, nation, gender, sexuality, as well as other divisions within the working class that are expressed as sectoral divides and reinforced by chauvinist policies, attitudes and harassment at the hands of the boss.

As critics have often noted, there was a stagist idea of how to radicalize the proletarians at work here. It was, after all, a strategy rooted in the most organized and often most militant sectors (such as logistics and manufacturing), that have the greatest direct power to disrupt profit through workplace strikes. At the same time, these sectors can be among the more socially conservative sections of the class in terms of receptiveness to hierarchies of nationality, gender, and race. Rather than viewing the working class as always already radicalized and for-itself, merely held back or restrained by false or conservative leadership, the rank and file strategy assumes that the development of consciousness – from trade-union to class, and perhaps from class consciousness to a revolutionary commitment – is the project of organized socialists built through concrete solidarity within overlapping layers of organization.

With this horizon in mind, *The Rank and File Strategy* laid out why the minority and then-shrinking sector of the already unionized workforce is a crucial arena for socialist intervention on both practical and political grounds. Many of these arguments remain quite convincing to young socialists seeking to commit themselves to a life of organizing and wishing to sustain themselves as an activist and militant without working on the basis of charitable grants or government funding. It is particularly convincing for those who might wish to organize from and toward their own truly held beliefs rather than primarily as a paid staffer beholden to the agenda of their employer, whether union, NGO, or government service provider. The pamphlet was especially sharp on the question of the necessity of workplace action to the achievement of even basic reforms, let alone the advancement toward or achievement of socialism. In the context of the community-heavy and particularistic 1990s that inspired it, it was rarely made and crucial point.

It must be pointed out that *The Rank and File Strategy* did not assert – in fact explicitly denied – that the workplace is the only or the most important source of workers' consciousness, and it was this recognition that drove its vision of "social movement unionism." A lengthy section of the pamphlet rooted the weakness of the U.S. workers' movement precisely in the history of African slavery and indigenous genocide in building a working class historically divided against itself and often more mobilized in an explicitly political way around its own internal divisions than against capital. The piece saves space for a special interlude on the role of union bureaucracy as a repository of some of the most backward historical forms of workers' consciousness, as a brake on militancy in moments of upsurge or even simply of militant fightback, and as an engine of anti-communism, meant broadly as the purging of all leftists and radicals from the labor movement. It attempted to synthesize both a non-sectarian assertion of the crucial role of socialists in potentiating, if not activating, rank and file rebellion when the conditions become ripe, and elucidated a compelling set of historical examples that underlie both the urgency of this and some of the recurring obstacles to the full development of a conscious and active class-for-itself: not only rearguard action by the bureaucracy, anti-communism, racism, and other kinds of chauvinism, but also sectarianism among socialists broadly committed to the strategy.

Moody also briefly mentions some of the limits of the original piece that have become much more salient. He calls these "the missing tasks," asking if there is a "particularly socialist way to approach union and workplace organizing." It makes sense that this was less of a focus in the original document, as the socialist movement was then particularly weak. Now, with the growth of the DSA to more than 60,000 new members, the question of the role of socialist organization and the role of the rank and file orientation within broader socialist strategy is much more urgent. The question

today is also what it means to be not only a socialist rank and filer, but a rank and filer who is part of a large socialist organization and of a growing socialist movement. Unfortunately, Moody raises this question [in *Jacobin*](#), but doesn't answer it there, instead turning to the welcome but well worn idea that socialist unionists should build militant minorities and fight for worker control in their unions, and build militant minority unions where unions don't already exist. The next installments of this essay will take up these "missing tasks," the militant minority, and the end game of the rank and file strategy.

Moody On Moody, Part 2: On Social Reproduction*

[Writing for *Jacobin*](#), [Kim Moody reflects on the rank and file strategy](#), focusing in part on the trajectory (and really, the failure) of the top-down, change-to-win model. This, of course, was the primary strategic alternative to the rank-and-file strategy following the period in which the original [pamphlet](#) was written. There is little on that balance sheet with which to disagree, and indeed, Moody's assertion is that even in a period of low class struggle, tight bureaucratic control over a "mobilization" model *produces* a more or less steady stream of localized rank-and-file rebellions.

Moody's reassessment, and his development of modern conditions in *On New Terrain*, also takes this observation somewhat more overtly in the direction of explicitly socialist organizing than anything that appeared in his original strategic perspective. In it, he begins to outline how socialist workplace organizing today must respond to new conditions and tasks at the level of transitional and socialist organization. Moody's original formulation suggests that rank-and-file movements must align themselves with "community" organizations, including worker centers and environmental organizations, and that this alliance is crucial because social movements are, like unions, training grounds for working-class and socialist organizers. In such struggles, working class organizers confront problems that are infrequently taken up by rank-and-file caucuses, or by unions more broadly: from state violence and gentrification to the destruction of the basic conditions of life, in terms of clean air, water, and habitable weather conditions in the name of profit.

It is notable that Moody approvingly mentions Giovanni Arrighi—with whom he has frequently been counterposed—and his insights about the dual nature and special vulnerabilities of capital's intensive modes of accumulation in this reassessment. Here, it is also worthwhile to mention Beverly Silver and her work in the same methodological and ideological vein in *Forces of Labor*, in particular her focus on the importance of public sector workers in the realm of social reproduction in "kicking off" new waves of struggle over the last century. Explicating Arrighi, she notes that conditions of austerity in the public sector create disruption of older forms of security and solidarity.

This is borne out in Moody's take in *Terrain* where he, too, emphasizes the importance of worker struggle in the public sector and among care workers, though neither he, nor she, makes explicit the reasons that social reproduction theorists suggest for explaining these developments, beyond a broad strokes understanding that they represent a reaction to austerity. Silver offers a useful quantitative account of the frequency and timeline of strikes in the social reproductive sector, but her focus is not on their political qualities. Moody, meanwhile, attends to the way changes in the composition of the workforce (including its increasing racial, national, and gender diversity and feminization across sectors) have potentiated action in these sectors, while also intensifying the potential for disruption and working-class power at nodes of circulation—"choke points" of distribution. Taken together, these insights point to a second sort of choke point: choke points of social reproduction in the realm of paid care.

Much of the work of social reproduction theory, especially its ethnographic and journalistic

engagements, points out how workers in these sectors may be first activated by the experience of their tasks, which engage the basic needs and ability of the working class as a whole to reproduce itself. This can spark not only early and militant action (as we've seen in the waves of teachers' and nurses' struggles, and later in the hospitality sector), but also produce a collective consciousness that takes up not only bread-and-butter demands for wages and benefits, but class-wide demands for services in education and healthcare. Often, these struggles are articulated as not just about the increasing pressures of work due to deskilling and downward wage pressure, but also as being about the general capitalist assault on the conditions of learning, health, and basic survival for broad sections of the working class, who are also these workers' students, patients, family, and community members. Moody has, in the process of engaging current debates about the rank and file since the publication of *On New Terrain*, [explicitly taken up this point](#).

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What, then, is the relationship between both kinds of "choke point" and the questions of organization and consciousness articulated in the rank-and-file strategy? And how do we think about adapting these to the current moment? It goes without saying that Moody's attention to choke points of distribution as well as production is central to building a workers' movement with the power to hit capital where it hurts—in profit-making—and to do so directly and strategically. On a structural level, this is simply a site of workers' power that cannot be dispensed with.

The equally necessary (but on its own insufficient) role of workers at choke points of social reproduction is undertheorized. In particular, their role in raising class-wide demands and consciousness of the working class as such, is just as indispensable to a fully worked-out, socialist, rank-and-file strategy. The argument here is that this specific form of consciousness arises out of the labor process of paid social reproductive work and *also* out of the social position of the workers engaged in it. Put another way, it arises out of the conditions of both paid and unpaid social reproductive labor, and in each case, out of a crisis of social reproduction, a crisis of care. The increasing desperation of most workers and their family and social networks to successfully reproduce themselves both in terms of bare life, but also as workers capable of abstractable labor-power.

In the course of conducting research in South Africa, I found that striking nurses frequently made this clear in their comments, explaining that their demands for increased staffing reflected both the pressures on them as workers caring for overloaded wards, and their concern for their own patients, but also their worries about the care available to themselves and members of their own families, which usually included elderly and HIV-affected adults often acutely in need health services.

In the United States, the [same sentiment was articulated by striking teachers in West Virginia](#), Oklahoma, Arizona, and California on a personal level. Rare was the public school teacher who could afford to educate their children privately. Teachers, from the beginning of the strike, made it plain that they were fighting for their own wages and those of all public sector workers in the state, and for their own students, but also for their children as students and for their retired parents, and the un- or underemployed members of their extended families who depended on schools, on the state employee's health care fund, and, at times, directly on the regular if minimal salaries of those same teachers. These networks not only reflected the distribution of care work and collective dependence on the wages of individual workers, but were pathways for collective memories of past strikes and militancy where nurses often had nurses as parents or teachers, teachers, who had also been on strike. These workers also remembered the changes in work, salary, and benefits over time.

The significance and potential of social reproduction choke points is increasingly obvious in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic and a historic uprising for Black liberation and against state violence, as social reproduction workers shut down sites of transmission and risk their own lives to treat the sick, while at the same time logistics workers strike for safe workplaces, for Black Lives, and to demonstrate their social necessity beyond the logic of profit.

The inclusion of social reproduction choke points into a strategic analysis of rank-and-file organizing expands the list of sectors and workplaces that might be targets for rank-and-file organizing and helps to flesh out the relationship between rank-and-file organizing and broader social movements. This revision might also be understood to introduce new relevant forms of transitional organization, as it complicates the original map of worker consciousness as implied in *The Rank and File Strategy*. If one of socialists' tasks is to develop broader and deeper consciousness among workers, it makes sense to attend to the arenas where that consciousness is already developing, based on the social, political, and productive roles particular workers may occupy.

To elaborate this, it helps to think about "social movements" in much the way the rank-and-file strategy frames workplace struggle: not as a parallel comparisons, but as overlapping and concurrent with its strategic understanding of the particular role of unionized workers, and those working in the realms of production and circulation of commodities.

If the rank-and-file strategy already allows that consciousness also develops outside the workplace, and social reproduction analysis demonstrates the ways in which that consciousness can be among the first sparks for waves of workplace struggle and rank-and-file rebellion, this seems like an urgent area for the further development of the rank-and-file idea.

"Such transitional formations could—as the civil rights and anti-war, feminist and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 70s once did—help coalesce a militant layer of radical, militant, and even revolutionary workers."

Even as initially articulated, the rank-and-file strategy allows that working class leadership and militancy emerges not only from workplace struggle, not only in workers' centers and the environmentalist movement, but in the broad social fights against sexism, against racism, and against oppression of trans and queer people. These movements, in periods of low struggle, have often been represented and dominated by (or even conflated with) NGO bureaucrats and the most privileged sections of those affected by oppression. But when social movement activity increases, organized working class elements within these movements are inevitably aware of this limitation and begin to contest for power with bureaucrats and reformist leaders. In moments of upsurge and uprising, these intra-movement conflicts intensify; to assume the inevitable defeat of rank-and-file protestors or rioters at the hands of the peace police or established reformist organizations is no more reasonable (or politically satisfactory) than assuming that the rebellions of union members will always lose out to entrenched leadership, even when that is most often the case.

Just as we have seen the rebirth of an organized socialist movement grow out of the financial crisis of 2008, and a radicalization develop from a politics of the 99% to more explicit working-class concerns, we have also seen a class-oriented radicalization amidst a wave of global feminist struggle and the struggle for Black liberation, as well as, in fits and starts, in the movement for the defense and rights of immigrants. Meanwhile, queer workers have led spurts of new union organizing in retail, in New York City, but also in Virginia and Washington, often against employers who market themselves as liberal, Democratic Party-identified, and gay/queer friendly. Such workers led a massive march in 2019 called "Reclaim Pride" against corporate Pride, and explicitly in support of Black Lives, Sex worker rights, trans rights, immigrant rights, and Palestinian liberation, and against police presence at the event and in LGBTQ communities. This year, Reclaim Pride reformed

under the same banner holding a massive protest for Black Queer Liberation.

In the feminist wave of #MeToo and the Women's March, we've seen precisely that same radical agenda asserted against the still-largely NGO and Democratic Party leadership, and seen it win. In the run-up to the Women's March of 2017, the then-largest single-day demonstration in the history of the United States, and certainly since the mass demonstrations against the second invasion of Iraq, women commentators in Facebook groups, and "members" of NGOs like the National Organization of Women (NOW) and Planned Parenthood pushed against initial organizing led by an all white and cis organizing committee. They asserted instead a bottom-up program of representation in terms of both personnel and platform of trans women, queer people, sex workers, immigrants, Black and Latinx women and queer people, and Palestinian women's rights.

The International Women's Strike took up this agenda and framed it in class terms, calling for a strike on March 8, 2017—International Women's Day—in line with calls internationally for mass women's strikes in Argentina, Poland, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe and Latin America. The call had to be taken up by the reluctant organizers of the Democratic Party-led Women's March, who until then, had planned a rally for the release of Trump's Tax Returns as the "next step" for the movement. The day resulted in the closure of three school districts in "red" states, anticipating the deep well of dissatisfaction among teachers and the mechanism of forcing district closure that later became the multi-state walk out of Red for Ed.

In a similar expression of class tensions and consciousness, in the early explosions of the Movement for Black Lives, we saw increasing conflict between the self-appointed leadership of the movement oriented toward NGO career advancement and Democratic Party politics, and class-conscious local organizers who criticized the consolidation of the movement on those grounds. These organizational dynamics echo the spontaneous ejection of long-time but compromised "leaders" of the Black struggle, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, from mass meetings and demonstrations during the intense wave of demonstrations following the police murder of Mike Brown. [#MeToo has sparked a wave of workplace action and strikes against sexual harassment in hotels and food service, entertainment and education, but also in the largely non-union auto sector in the South.](#)

Since then, of course, the historically large mass of four million Women's March protesters has been utterly dwarfed by an estimated thirty million people participating in the George Floyd Rebellion and the ongoing uprising. The relative size and power of this class-quake has produced comparably large rifts and openings in the same vein as its precursors. In a few short months, a range of immediate reforms have gone from pipe-dream to promise, and labor demands like the removal of police from school grounds or from the AFL-CIO as a whole are suddenly making piecemeal headway and have moved from niche, to normalized well beyond the radical left.

Longstanding institutions long taken for granted as the representatives of Black politics—even the more recently constituted NGO/Democratic Party formation which trademarked Movement for Black Lives in the years since Ferguson—moved well behind the pace of the increasing radicalism of movement demands. Where once body cameras and 25% reductions in police budgets seemed to mark the left edge of a reformist agenda, now, calls for full defunding, disbanding, and disarmament are standard. Even anti-capitalist calls for full "abolition" of the police (recalling the multiple and mutually-implied calls for "abolition" in the [Communist Manifesto](#)) are routinely discussed not only in far left reading circles and coalition meetings, but in the mainstream press. Predictably, this radicalism has been met with backlash—from the far right and the Trump administration and from state and local governments, but also from liberal NGOs taking up the task of reigning in radical ambitions and militant activities. The ultimate outcome of those contests remains to be seen.

In thinking about these tensions through a social reproduction frame, the original conception of

“social movement unionism” in rank-and-fileism requires some revision. Instead of organizing the relationship between the union rank-and-file, and working class organization and tendencies within social movements in and through layers of bureaucracy in central labor councils and NGO coalitions, it seems increasingly possible and consistent with the strategy’s emphasis on working class leadership to connect the ranks of unions with the more class conscious and independent layers of social movements directly. To that end, projects similar to the International Women’s Strike, or the recently activated [Peoples’ Strike](#), could potentially serve as an additional form of “transitional organization.” Such formations serve as both a coalition space and a left pole, attracting unorganized and radicalizing individuals, while open to participation by socialist organizations, union caucuses, worker centers, coops, tenants unions, feminist, queer, trans, immigrant and other collectives.

Such transitional formations could—as the civil rights and anti-war, Women’s Liberation and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 70s once did—help coalesce a militant layer of radical, militant, and even revolutionary workers who can not only build the power of organized workers toward class demands (including those generated through social movement upsurge), but cohere newly activated sections of the working class in independent organizations that can weather and prepare for the inherently inconsistent and unpredictable lulls and upticks in spontaneous social rebellion. Transitional formations can create continuity during lulls in social movement activity and engage in political education within the organized workers’ movement, framing the questions not, as they are in bourgeois politics, as “divisive” culture-war tempests, but as practical matters of the everyday life of coworkers, family, and community members. They can also support and sustain shop floor, tenant, and other formations acting as a political center across sectors and arenas of struggle.

Imagine, for instance, if after the murder of Teamster member and beloved school service worker Philando Castile, a front of workers and worker organizations had been better able to raise his murder within the organized labor movement, not just as an abstract matter of racial justice but as an attack on a union sibling, in the way that Teamsters did when, more recently, [Frank Oronez was killed by police while on the job as a UPS driver](#). Imagine if now, in a new period of increasing radicalization and politicization, socialists were organized to take up the next iteration of something like the struggle of the Charleston 5, that could not only be turned to [reform efforts within the ILA](#) but toward radicalization of the Black movement along class lines and radicalization of the labor movement along anti-racist ones. Conditions today clearly favor these possibilities more than they did two decades ago, and we need a rank-and-file and a socialist strategy primed to take them up *now* and whenever critical moments for doing so occur.

To a significant degree, this kind of social reproduction rank-and-fileism, rooted in explicitly working class formations, is increasingly possible and underway, building on the longer efforts of rank-and-file unionists and socialists who committed some (sometimes many) years ago to a vision of building working class power from below. The new popularity and expression of rank-and-file strategies among the layers of socialists radicalized more recently are also playing a crucial role, particularly among the nurses on the frontlines of the pandemic, among teachers pushing for schools safe from police and pathogens, and in both union and non-union workplaces deemed essential (in retail, logistics, and sanitation).

In the absence of coherent or effective public health policy, and in the heat of mass struggle, the logic of worker’s control has even (occasionally, very temporarily) emerged as a practical possibility or necessity—from workers strikes demanding changes in production toward socially necessary goods (ventilators and other scarce medical equipment), to cross-sector mutual aid delivering Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to where it was most needed, to health care workers’ demands for industry rationalization and nationalization, to transit workers starting and stopping buses and trains on the basis of clear goals: resist police and aid protesters. In these moments, glimmers of the

socialist vision and method that animates the rank-and-file strategy appear where they once seemed unlikely-to-impossible.

But what is (and what has been) actually or explicitly socialist about the rank and file strategy, in both its earlier form and in more recent years? Moody is exactly right to raise this question now even as it was largely glossed over in his first rendition of the strategy. Given a few years of renewal in a growing socialist movement, and a few months of crisis and collective action, the question of how to get from shop-floor struggle to a new society suddenly seems like something more than a thought exercise or a deeply held wish. At the same time, we have much more recent experience to observe for the purpose of understanding how the rank-and-file strategy has played out in the context of a growing, organized, socialist movement .

The final part of this essay (part 3) will grapple with the practice and potential of the actually-existing 21st century rank-and-file strategy, and how it has shaped the way socialists as a whole have been able to engage and intervene in the current moment of profound crisis and urgent possibility.

Part 3: Socialists And The Rank And File Strategy

Socialists today face a set of conditions that is, at once, very like those which socialists faced when *The Rank and File Strategy* was published, while in other ways, the political economic terrain we operate in is utterly transformed. The working class is still facing a profound crisis of organization; the labor movement continues to shrink, and is largely on the defensive despite a number of hopeful signs of new militancy, increasing success and frequency of strike action. On the other hand, the working class is increasingly politicized, and the socialist movement, while still small, has grown from numbers in the single digits of thousands at its low point in the 2000s to, now, tens of thousands of card-carrying members.

One condition that is mentioned but not strategically taken up in Moody's new book is the degree to which Bernie Sanders' presidential run reflected and expanded a new reality of "open" declarations of socialism following the long political half-life of McCarthyism in the United States. *The Rank and File Strategy* was largely silent on the question of whether socialists should organize openly as such, but it certainly did not require them to do it.

Practically, until very recently, Moody's comrades and acolytes largely did not organize as open socialists, despite the intentions of many to do so. In the new iteration of the strategy in the DSA, however, in part because the surge of interest in the DSA and rank and file organizing followed Bernie, it is impossible to keep socialist commitments under wraps. [The DSA's role in helping to foment the initial teachers' strike in West Virginia is well and publicly known, if contentious](#), mentioned and discussed openly both in the press and in the rotunda of the statehouse where teachers gathered during the strike. It was more recently mobilized to argue that the pathway, to more strikes and rank and file power is through a strategic engagement with the Democratic Party and full tilt left and labor commitment to the 2020 Bernie campaign.

What then is the role of socialist organizations and socialist politics in the *rank and file strategy* and vice versa? When the original document was written, the hope was for a regroupment of socialist forces within a single organization, and the implied but not specified trajectory of the rank and file transformation of the labor movement was toward a *break* of the labor movement with the Democratic Party. While the relationship between the two wasn't spelled out, criticism of left and working class subjection to the Democratic Party as a capitalist party is a strategic orientation Moody has elaborated in print nearly as often as he has pressed for rank and fileism.

In fact, Moody's exposition of the scope and nature of Democratic Party formation and rule is among the clearest and most explicit we have. Moody expands on these ideas in *On New Terrain* and in some specific articles on this topic in [New Politics](#), where he argues that the Democratic Party, far from a "hollow institution" ready for takeover, is one arranged with centers of power far out of reach of ordinary members and with both formal rules and funding structures designed deliberately to undermine the power of the mass of working-class people who make up its base.

I think it is worthwhile to expand on Moody's assessment of the Democratic Party, in a way that enhances his challenge to left electoral strategies inside the Democratic Party both those that propose [tactical use of ballot lines](#) (like [Ackerman](#)) and those which openly [reprise Harrington's realignment approach](#). To think it through, we have to consider the Democratic Party not merely as a party, but as a broader apparatus that holds sway well beyond the ballot box. This requires consideration not just of the fact that historically the party and the tendency to collapse protest and direct action movements into get-out-the-vote campaigns for Democrats have always become a "graveyard" for these movements, but also of the way these movements have been led in this direction. It requires investigation into the way in which the primacy of elections has been maintained on the left, despite the increasingly apparent lack of democratic structures not only in the Democratic Party itself but in the overall electoral system at every level – an issue that has activated radicalizing working-class people for two decades, from the transparently undemocratic events, enabled by both major parties, surrounding Bush v. Gore in 2000, to the increasingly gerrymandered scramble between the parties for permanent one-party fiefdoms in cities and states, to the ongoing disenfranchisement of a massive prison population and to concerted assaults on the voting rights act.

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Moody's analysis of the Democratic Party has often been rejected by rank and file strategy advocates in the DSA as either a naive simplification of the possibilities of using Democratic party ballot lines, or as a holdover of a dogmatic sectarian socialist past. Instead, I think this detachment of the rank and file strategy from Moody's remarkable clarity about the limits and dangers of socialist and working class capture by the Democratic Party is one that undermines the potential and immediate power of rank and file organizing, and that this is not merely a theoretical objection. The 4-6 year-long experiment in orienting the rank and file strategy towards Bernie Sanders Democratic (socialist!) Party insurgency has demonstrated in practice the validity of this less popular aspect of Moody's strategic vision.

The socialist regroupment envisioned in Moody's and Solidarity's iteration of the rank and file strategy has in large part taken place inside the DSA, even if it has been overshadowed by new membership and the growth of the socialist left. In this context, the question of a break with this Democratic Party and its broader apparatus, seems distant, perhaps even further today than it was when the rank and file strategy was written. At that time, the left was coming off a failed attempt at organizing a Labor Party, and about to take up building the Green Party as a left-populist alternative to the Democrats on the strength of ballot access generated through Ralph Nader's 2000 presidential run.

In the end, both experiments in "independent" working-class politics were failures, and for the same reason: the labor bureaucracy was not ready to break with the Democratic Party. In both cases, most labor leaders stuck with the Democratic Party lending their internal get-out-the-vote apparatus and their ability to mobilize members to Democrats, rather than to any third party alternative. This is because that layer continued to see its power as a consequence of favor from Democratic Party

politicians and to see that favor, limited as it is, as conditional on their ability to get out the vote for Democratic politicians. This has remained a sticking point in more recent efforts to reform the Democratic Party from within, either by takeover or by realignment – in a latest example, despite teachers being the job category most supportive of Bernie Sanders candidacy, and despite the weight of powerful socialist-led reform locals in Chicago and LA, the AFT ultimately endorsed Joe Biden in the primary. It was more or less a forgone conclusion that this would be the case.

The Green Party particularly exemplifies the weakness of left populism that lacks a clear class politics or socialist character, and any meaningful base in the working class, where its political muddle and declining support have mutually contributed to a downward spiral since the height of the Nader campaign. Once a home to a truly popular progressive slice of the electorate that viewed the Democratic Party as a barrier to its aims, it has become a petri dish of conspiracism and left-to-right reaction, pandering to a small coalition of supporters of right-wing dictators on purportedly left grounds, of “feminists” fixated on trans women as the main enemy of feminism, and of environmentalists primarily motivated by a misguided and increasingly explicit racist Malthusianism. Many more good comrades continue to participate and build the Green Party, but it is difficult to see a path toward joining the Green Party to an organized working class base that could take on these toxic elements and turn the ship around.

In the [Labor Party](#), on the other hand, the failure consisted of the [ultimate unwillingness of most labor bureaucrats to genuinely cut the cord with Democratic Party patrons](#) and establish an independent electoral front. This was due not only to the direct relationships long established by labor’s GOTV efforts and the marked but never reliable differences between Democrats and Republicans on labor policy, but also to the Democratic Party apparatus’ control and influence on NGO-ified and Democratic Party-allied social movements, organized as distinct constituencies.

These were then the closest allies of even left-wing unions in a partially operative strategy of “social movement unionism,” but one that reinforced electoral ties with the Democratic Party and a certain degree of transactional solidarity between organizations conceiving themselves as distinct minority interest groups. This was and is true of both more radical NGOs of the period, as well as more establishment-oriented NGOs, such as the National Organization of Women (NOW), that demonstrated their willingness to back Bill Clinton despite repeated accusations of rape and sexual assault and weak Democratic Party protections for women’s rights in office. As outlined in [The Revolution Will Not Be Funded](#), a host of self-proclaimed radical NGOs ultimately toed the line set by Democratic Party aligned funders on crucial issues ranging from Palestinian liberation to criminal justice reform.

This weakness, defined and compounded by acceptance of a narrow legal remit of union bargaining and strike action, is intensified by a continued strategy of building solidarity between rank and filers and social movements through local union leaderships, CLCs, and NGOs in coalition. This structure locates the solidarity of working-class people and organizations solidly within the Democratic Party apparatus, and orients it fundamentally toward elections. This is because the Democratic Party is oriented toward elections and not toward building labor and social movements, toward politics defined and constrained by a ruling class agenda, not toward building working class power. This is coldly material in the sense that money raised for say, the Bernie Sanders campaign, can’t then be reoriented toward extra-electoral efforts, and neither can internal party apparatus aimed at electing him or other left-wing Democrats – Our Revolution can’t legally be repurposed toward movement building and neither can the tens of millions that working class people donated to Bernie’s campaigns.

Bernie’s “political revolution” wasn’t able to overcome this basic structural problem – that presented by the commitments of the labor and NGO bureaucracies – that has plagued previous attempts to

organize working class political independence by first and primarily focusing on the electoral realm. While Sanders supporters in fact argued for a few different strategic rationales for the campaign as an advance toward political independence of the working class, none of these seems to have panned out or to be clearly advancing on the strategic path set out by its advocates. The recent Democratic National Convention was notable for its rigid exclusion of Bernie wing of the party, from platform and podium, with the exception of a pro-forma speech from Sanders and a more rousing, if brief and plausibly deniable dig at Biden and the powers that be, by the popular left-wing congresswoman from New York, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez.

“When socialist and rank and file politics have been, for several years, at their most popular since the Great Depression, why have they, in practice, so far failed to radicalize the existing labor movement? Why have they failed to organize any front of working-class organizations prepared to take self-defense action in the face of quite extreme and urgent threats?”

The argument that Bernie’s campaign was a working class insurgency that could realign or replace the Democratic Party has been clearly rejected in practice by the success of the Biden campaign and its absolute refusal to incorporate, even symbolically or dishonestly, Bernie’s most popular proposals for working class reforms or any elements of the campaign. Even more, the lack of coherent response by Bernie-backing socialists, let alone Sanders himself to this predictable impasse reveals the degree to which strategic engagement of socialists with the bourgeois ballot line and the strategic redeployment of shop-floor activism toward a focus on Bernie was more a series of shotgun weddings and rationalizations for alliances of opportunity than a worked out strategy.

The argument that the campaign could be a vehicle for building working class and left forces within the Democratic Party, toward a (dirty) break and a new independent party formation has also crashed and burned; if anything openings for national-level independent working class and socialist politics in terms of elections at the national level seem more narrow than ever before. There doesn’t seem to be much (if any) move toward this kind of break, in part because of the long-anticipated situation of this election. This is one in which the sitting President seems to be attempting to undermine the election results at every turn, and where the only viable opposition party darkly hints at the likelihood of drawn-out contestation of poll results and electoral college challenges. This isn’t fertile terrain for launching a new attempt at an independent party with little to no chance of attracting an organized base – certainly not more so than for other recent attempts. This is despite the still-increasing popularity of socialism, of major pro-working class reforms like universal health care and police reform, and the emergence of a large, militant, and sustained working-class rebellion across the country, the likes of which haven’t been seen for generations.

At the same time, 2020 has presented new and quite dire threats to the working class, around the world certainly, but particularly in the USA. The Trump administration’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been so disastrous that the word “failure” doesn’t really cover it as a descriptor; sadistic opportunism and sabotage is a more appropriate way to understand the actions of a federal government bent on escalating attacks on the working class, with special viciousness reserved for immigrants, Black people, women and queers, public sector workers, and leftists. Long-looming economic crisis converging with the pandemic has put tens of millions out of work, precipitated a mass eviction crisis, and resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of people, many of which were absolutely preventable. Democratic Party-controlled states have hardly performed much better. One hopes that with control of the White House and Congress they might have offered a more controlled Malthusianism, but in the face of such a long period of economic activity, even these seemingly more rational managers are chomping at the back-to-work bit, even if it means the sacrifice of a few thousand more working-class people’s lives.

While the virus remains untamed in much of the country, police murder and horrific immigration detention also continue apace. Vigilantes and organized fascist elements have made their presence known in the form of armed occupation of state houses, as “protesters” blocking ambulances from transporting the sick and dying to hospitals. Mass online networks are disseminating elaborate conspiracy theories, and the far right has become increasingly visible in the form of car attacks on protests and pickets – these have developed increasingly into openly fascist terror attacks by armed individuals and groups, and these in turn have increasingly engaged in public collaboration with police departments in some cities and towns.

We have, of course, seen brave (and thrilling) efforts by workers in many sectors to confront this assault through job actions. These have been sporadic and largely organized outside of the formal structures of the labor movement and those of the left. So far, these have not begun to coalesce into more sustained strike action or into any organization with the capacity to grow or to begin to match and anticipate the array and degree of threats we face. When socialist and rank and file politics have been, for several years, at their most popular since the Great Depression, why have they, in practice, so far failed to radicalize the existing labor movement? Why have they failed to organize any front of working-class organizations prepared to take self-defense action in the face of quite extreme and urgent threats?

I do hope that my posing this question this way turns out to have been a misreading of the state of working-class and socialist organization and simply premature. Teachers, clearly, continue to be at the leading edge of organized workers’ struggle for class-wide demands and self-defense, and many are agitating for and preparing strike actions to limit the threat of a viral bomb in the form of school reopenings that are now imminent or already underway across the United States. They have been joined, happily, by NBA and WNBA players striking for Black Lives of the sort that the ILWU has in some locations been threatening for several months.

But, I think, it is also the case that some of the potential of the new engagement of socialists with the shop floor and bottom-up union organizing has been limited by the degree to which that energy has been poured over several years from the DSA into elections, and thus detached from the goal of building working class-organization independent of the Democratic Party. Moody’s rank and file, without his class independence, is a champion fighting with at least one hand tied behind her back.

That the regroupment of presumably non-sectarian socialist forces has taken place inside the DSA presents some specific problems for Kim Moody’s rigorous critique of the Democratic Party, which are a product of the specific history of that formation, and of the way in which the primary advocates of rank and fileism have oriented themselves within it. If the new socialist bloom of DSA growth and the attendant seeding of rank and fileism is to come to different ends than the collapse of much of the socialist/communist left into the Rainbow Coalition in the late 1980s, there are some specific contradictions which will have to be directly addressed.

The strategy of building socialist politics or a party within the Democratic Party has some particular problems in addition to the ones it shares with failed attempts at independent politics. As Moody elaborates in *On New Terrain*, the leaders of the Democratic Party are opposed to this and will mobilize every tool at their disposal to prevent it – indeed, they have done precisely this. Moody describes how the demands of professional politicking first and already undermine the democratic character of insurgent campaigns, the ways in which formal and informal structures of power simultaneously co-opt socialist ideas and result in a stacked system that, at increasingly high levels of power, decrease the ability of candidates who refuse the offer of capitalist funding to win.

Should they do so, the immediate pressures to perform loyalty to the party in the form of softening the line and endorsing (enemy) standard bearers come instantly into play. We’ve seen some of these

processes up close and recently in the second campaign of Bernie Sanders for the presidency. Whereas in his first campaign, criticism of the Democratic Party was front and center, in the second attempt, he found himself having to defend himself as a “real” Democrat and heavily criticized by likely primary voters for being disloyal to the party. His speech at the recent Democratic National Convention was a lovely recitation of his most popular policy positions that I think resonated with his supporters and beyond; unfortunately it was in the service of endorsing a candidate and platform utterly and aggressively opposed to those policies.

The Democratic Party is a machine primarily concerned with elections in the realm of municipal state and national elections. The influence of the party on the labor movement, via the labor bureaucracy, doesn't end at the requirement that unions play the role of canvasser and vote-delivery apparatus for its preferred candidates. The Democratic Party and its bureaucratic labor top clients also tend to push a labor movement strategy that prioritizes elections, legalism, symbolic over direct action, and siloed concerns between labor and social movements, in a word demobilization of the working-class movement broadly.

The same can be said of the party's NGO clients and their “leaders;” just one example in this realm, recently, has been Planned Parenthood's rejection and opposition to any street-level defense of clinics, patients, and services in the face of on-the-ground right-wing mobilization aimed at intimidating patients and providers. Just as union bureaucrats oppose and limit the activation of members in favor of the legislative agenda of Democratic Party patrons, seeing their own ability to stay in well-paid power hinging on toeing that line (even in a moment of extreme dues-shrinking crises), NGOs oriented to service provision and lobbying and without even the democratic features of unions, take much the same tack, against employees, patients, and/or clients.

More generally, the role played by NGO-based self-appointed leaders in the context of this summer's Black liberation and anti-police uprising has largely been one of open attempts to pacify an angry and militant mass movement, with calls to “stay peaceful” in the face of extreme violence, and to take the power of the streets to the polls, while condemning any instigators of property destruction or even angry chants as possible instigators and infiltrators. On the rightward end of the NGO spectrum, we find calls to reconcile with the police and assertion that the police themselves, rather than protesters in the streets or organized workers and tenants represent the real potential “change agents.”

The DSA's focus on the Democratic Party, even as an opposition force within it, and on elections subjects it to much the same pressures and pull that impact the layers of labor leadership and NGO managers who have long been embroiled within that structures system of rewards and retribution, and calls for coalition across class lines. We saw this potential realized in 2016-17 in the sphere of immigration struggles when large number of DSA locals, inspired by occupations of ICE offices in Philadelphia, Portland, and St. Louis, aimed to replicate the strategy. Following the spontaneous occupations of airports following Trump's sudden and terrifying country bans, an initial strategy call was organized including members from chapters across the country.

DSA member and Democratic Party Women's March Organizer, Linda Sarsour was appointed by DSA staff to present a national strategy consisting entirely of a one-off march and symbolic direction action—a die-in in DC. Local chapters were left to coordinate any occupations outside of their own socialist organization. In Philadelphia, where the occupation was coordinated through a united front of socialist organizations, including a left caucus of the DSA chapter there, activists were able to raise the leftmost demand of the immigrant rights movement and ultimately win it: ending the PARS program, a specific data sharing agreement with ICE, enforcing the city's self-designation as a “sanctuary city.” In Portland, a DSA chapter with a left-wing orientation similarly occupied ICE offices and won local concessions around ICE/public sector cooperation. In St. Louis, a similar

occupation also succeeded in disrupting ICE operations, but not in transforming action into reform. No other DSA chapters managed to pull off any similar action. In New York, DSA members and leaders actively discouraged attempts in this direction, arguing to those assembled with intent to occupy that doing so would harm immigrants in the immediate term and would otherwise have no impact on immigration policy. Doing nothing, of course, has had exactly this unfortunate effect, and we've not seen since any effort at a coordinated strategy within DSA or the larger socialist movement to confront the ongoing terror and torture of the USA's modern-day concentration camps, effective or otherwise. This, despite the very promising and widely supported, spontaneous mass occupations of airports in defense of immigrants in the early days of Trump's term and mass outrage at family separation and the increasingly harsh and overtly murderous conditions in detention camps, and at the widely-exposed far-right politicization of ICE and border patrol.

"Just as advocates of Ackerman's "ballot line" strategy have presented the Democratic Party as a hollow shell ripe for takeover, a point extensively disputed by Kim Moody, so have the advocates of rank and filism in the DSA presented the organization as a blank slate with little connection to its past affiliations and orientation."

A fleshed out and consistent socialist strategy focusing on building this movement as one rooted in workplace, shop-floor and direct action, and on turning periodic bursts of social movement energy to the workplace and other forms of rooted long-term working class organizing, might count among its victories many more such substantive contributions to immigrant solidarity, and pave the way for a repeat and expansion of the workers' power on display in West Virginia.

Imagine a socialist organization putting the energy and resources representing even half of those directed toward electoral work, toward a campaign building on the spontaneous solidarity by transit workers in Minneapolis, New York, and elsewhere with protestors in the early days of the George Floyd rebellions, with a goal of expanding workers' commitments to refuse transport of police and prisoners the the broader system of prison and immigration detention and control. Or a large-scale and sustained effort to propagate the logic of recent moments when workers in several disconnected plants struck or simply chose to retool and redirect production in their workplace toward the things that the working class actually needs in this moment of crisis - medical equipment and hand sanitizer. Or one building on the actions of retail and service workers who spontaneously refused service to police, or with wildcats erupting in meat and other food processing plants where immigrant workers struck for their own and all of our safety to prevent inevitable COVID-19 outbreaks, in the face of inevitable (and actualized) retaliation by ICE agents. Imagine if that kind of campaign had the support of a robust socialist campaign against ICE that had been growing and sharpening its tactics over the course of two previous years, and that movement was able to take up the challenge of millions marching and rioting against racist anti-Black police violence.

It may well be that even our best collective efforts as an organized socialist movement wouldn't have met that challenge, but it is certain that without focused attention to strategic organizing out of spontaneous moments of bold worker and working-class action, these struggles and sparks, though growing in frequency and intensity, have died out or been doused by all manner of ill-conceived redirections from outside and inside the socialist left.

In the sphere of union and workplace organizing, the DSA's overwhelming focus on electing progressive candidates directly represents a danger for the rank and file strategy. Just as advocates of Ackerman's "ballot line" strategy have presented the Democratic Party as a hollow shell ripe for takeover, a point extensively disputed by Kim Moody, so have the advocates of rank and filism in the DSA presented the organization as a blank slate with little connection to its past affiliations and orientation. This is a similarly suspect formulation. Take as an example the historical close ties between the "old" (pre-Bernie) DSA and the leadership of the American Federation of Teachers, and

in particular its conservative New York iteration, the UFT. While this connection seems to be much less influential in the “new” DSA, transformed by Bernie and by the revival of the rank and file strategy, its legacy seems to haunt the debates (and to shape the limits of debate) within the DSA.

Essays in [Jacobin](#) and *Catalyst* by elected DSA leaders and closely associated intellectuals (Touré Reed, Cedric Johnson, and Adolph Reed, for example), as well as in [The Call](#), a blog operated as the voice of the rank and file strategy within DSA, have heralded Bayard Rustin as a kind of democratic socialist exemplar. Rustin was a close associate of [Albert Shanker, the former President of the UFT and representative of a narrow right-wing and top-down political strategy both within and outside the union](#), and not, as far as we have any evidence, a partisan of rank and file democracy either in unions or in the social movements where he built his reputation as an organizer and activist.

For queers, the example is particularly poignant. Rustin was forced to live his life as an activist largely in the closet and often under threat or reality of being outed, expelled, humiliated, and exiled on the basis of his sexuality as a gay man. Compounding a political picture opposed to the possibilities of a rank and file strategy, particularly one that might be committed to explicit and organized anti-racism, feminism, and pro-queer politics, the specific contribution of Rustin’s that was highlighted both in *Jacobin* and *The Call* was his taking up of color-blind social democratic reforms (explicitly compared to the Erfurt Program) as the legacy of the civil rights movement. In this discussion, this was counterposed to a politics which “does both” the work of broad demands and that of the self-organization of working-class people within the movements for Black people’s, immigrants’, womens’, and queer lives.

Here, I think, it is crucial to point to the difference between viewing the latter as a moral rather than a strategic injunction, and to point out that the tendency to imagine that these politics might be an automatic consequence or effect of broad-based reform. [Moody himself](#) takes on this very issue when he refutes this mistaken nostalgia for Rustin and the historical misreading of Rustin’s career that that nostalgia entails.

Since then, the association between the rank and file strategy and a politics openly hostile to anti-racist, feminist, queer, immigrant or other so-called “particular” demands seems, happily, to have waned. Nevertheless, the debate itself remains alive in the DSA, or at least on its outermost and most public edges – and in fact, it is being mainstreamed. [Adolph Reed’s condemnations of DSA’s Afrosocialist Caucus as an example of “cancel culture” found their way into the New York Times](#). This echoed, even if unintentionally, the framework and slogans characteristic of the [intensifying McCarthyite obsessions of Trump](#) and street-level fascists with so-called “cancel culture.”

It is certainly the case that Reed isn’t any more accountable to DSA members than most of the other celebrities of the new socialist and social democratic moment. (He is apparently not a member of any DSA chapter, despite his influence in internal debates and his public-facing media profile.) And it seems clear that most members of DSA don’t share Reed’s fixation on rooting out “identity politics,” even as a layer of socialist media figures rally around him on precisely this point, amplifying his oft-repeated objections to any organizing by or for oppressed groups as such, and boiling them down into crass and reactionary slogans or ironic and jaded social media postures of contrarian snark.

Even while most DSA members and many of its leaders actively oppose these kinds of oppositions between race and class (or any so-called “fringe issue” and class), it’s hard not to see the hauntology of DSA’s aggressively anti-communist, anti-Marxist past in the stubbornness and tenacity with which this conflict continuously re-emerges in the form of intra-socialist conflict rather than as slander by external enemies. It appears to forget the long shadow of similar kinds of McCarthyist, anti-anti-racism in the AFL-CIO during the mid-20th century.

Then, the specter of labor radicalism, Black liberation, and Marxism became the major justification for purging the formal labor movement of any and all leftists or rank and file organizers who posed real or simply potential internal political competition to an increasingly conservative bureaucratic leadership – even where some of the organizers thrown under the bus of anti-communism were the very individuals who had trained, organized, and campaigned for the labor officials who directly turned on them. Sometimes these organizers were even accused of being Stalinist operatives when they were open critics of his regime.

But none of that is to say that the most immediate danger for rank and file organizers or revolutionaries comes from inside the house (of socialism). On the contrary, the main impact of frequent confrontations with such bureaucracy-based formulations has been a missed opportunity. It is not merely that Reed or even his acolytes have large platforms and loud echo chambers that have created the conditions whereby the same bad point need to be continuously countered.

“Is it still possible that a working-class movement can confront the fast-approaching endgame of now daily threats by both Biden and Trump to much more directly and harshly confront the militancy of the streets and workplaces, all under the guise of defeating the nefarious influences of “foreign actors,” “anarchists,” and “communists”?”

The salience of such unnecessary oppositions is not merely the result of its frequent repetition in the realm of social media discourse. It has also developed as a matter of practical politics: through the orientation of rank and file strategy toward Bernie’s second campaign and the demand that unions should endorse Bernie, and through short-cut strategies to persuade progressive-leaning union officials to do so. Political endorsements of this kind make particularly poor hooks for campaigns for union democracy, contrary to the widely-held argument that Bernie’s campaign prepared an especially fertile ground for recruiting union militants to socialist organization.

I am certain that more than a little bit of that did happen, of course, but at the cost of another also common dynamic – one in which strong partisans of any non-Bernie candidate inside our unions was unlikely to be drawn into the fight for reform or shop-floor power. They were given every reason to understand efforts to force endorsements from below as instrumental to Bernie supporters’ enthusiasm for their candidate, rather than as an effort to fundamentally transform the relationship between members and our unions or as a campaign for democracy aimed at creating space for shop-floor power.

Bernie’s campaign itself did do some wonderful promotion of shop-floor and rank and file organizing, including putting out calls for pickets to support teachers and autoworkers and raising solidarity funds for workers organizing in logistics, retail and elsewhere. While this use of campaign structures was far and away better than the use most other presidential candidates made of theirs, and much better than nothing, from the perspective of the most optimal use of socialist resources, these benefits for rank and file fights were marginal when considered against the vast amount of money raised from small, working-class donors or time expended. It is hard to take seriously the idea that these expenditures were the most efficient use of resources or most logical path to building independent worker organization and militancy. What’s more, the campaign also put out conflicting messages that at times directly countered the sort of consciousness that rank and file organizing is intended to cultivate.

Messages like “not me us” and “fight for someone you don’t know” certainly echo the intention of all sincere unionists and popularize a class-resonant sensibility. At the same time, many of Bernie’s strongest supporters came to believe that the campaign was “our only hope” for health care or for socialism or political “revolution,” so much that the intra-union concerns for lasting relationships among coworkers and fellow members might come to seem less urgent. Building trust and functional

political points of unity between coworkers on the shop floor could and did fall by the wayside, at least, in the most urgent moments of the campaign.

Often the most intense battles could be between the leftmost, most engaged, members of a local, as conflict between Sandernistas and Warrenites heated up, leaving distrust in its wake beyond the Bernie boom. In my own local, one that is, admittedly, an outlier in a number of ways, a recent and brief campaign to pass a resolution in favor of removing cops from our campus garnered rank and file reformers an unprecedented number of full-time supporters. This was an exceedingly hopeful sign for the cross-title, cross-tier organizing we had not been able to achieve previously as a movement made up primarily of part-time contingent faculty members. In comparison, pushing for Bernie as our union's candidate (which I personally did, with passion!) reinforced the long-standing and strike-killing divide between tiers, even splitting the base of reform-minded adjuncts.

Admittedly, my union is strange in the US labor movement, but the way in which it is weird should in this case have turned a Bernie boost into a slam dunk. By any account, the PSC/CUNY faculty union has to be the single local with the highest percentage of formally affiliated socialists of any in the country. Our leadership, too, is socialist-heavy, though probably more in line with a number of other locals in various sectors. So we should have won this fight handily at least if the then-popular theory about Bernie's impact on class consciousness and open appeal to socialism had any validity. If talking about popular class demands and saying the word "socialism" was calling socialists into being, we had a head start. But we didn't even get close.

In the end, I don't know of any unions where the fight to nominate Bernie won substantial new reforms for internal union democracy, or any major unions or even large locals, that were won to support for Bernie in this way absent a long-term, pre-Bernie reform movement in the union, begun and sustained by independent organizers.

In part because of the pressure of the specific exigencies of rank and fileism for Bernie, today's rank and filers appear, at times, to share political commitments contrary to both the letter of the original rank and file strategy and to the possibilities for an updated, timely version suggested in the first sections of this essay. In practice, the need to build a coalition (and fast!) collapsed distinctions between rank and file causes or reform-led unions and progressive but top-down ones. It erased the distinction between a staff-driven strategy and a worker-led one, vacillating between anti-racist and feminist stances and opposition to the self-organization of oppressed groups as a central plank of socialist strategy.

The latter impulse tilted toward not only Democratic Party politics, but a particular version of them. Still working on the theory of "coalition" and the premise of the primacy of elections, pushing for a rhetorical shift away from liberal feminism or anti-racism and toward a performative "class politics" that treats class as an identity rather than a position for organizing. Ultimately this seemingly endless tempest in a socialist media teapot – over a vision of class politics counter-posed to working-class, socialist commitments to anti-racism, feminism, and queer struggle – reflects more a struggle for turf and territory within a coalition of constituency brokers that *includes* labor officialdom rather than any clash of competing principle or even over clear and distinct strategic oppositions.

In the context of even the best electoral strategy for disrupting the Democratic Party as usual, it's easy to see how "class" can too easily stand in for the presumably disaffected, white, and usually male worker who might be won to vote for a Bernie, but not for a Warren or a Hillary. Just as Biden and the DNC triangulate with disaffected Republican moguls and suburbanites by pushing back on the self-organization of the left and then counting on their support, while focusing on winning an ambivalent and fundamentally conservative Joe Singlemalt, the structure of the Bernie campaign had a similar impact on the left, only the Joe in question was Rogan, or, at least a slice of his numerous

and notably politically confused-to-committedly-chauvinist and conspiracy-prone listeners.

Even where the 21st-century expression of the rank and file strategy directly acknowledges the existence of a diverse working class, along with the continued salience of racism, the potential for subordination of potentially transformative shop-floor organizing to a progressive coalitional electoral strategy remains. This confusion is made possible by a lack of clarity around the nature and role of the union bureaucracy as a distinct layer, with distinct interests, one which the rank and file strategy in some ways itself leaves open, but about which Kim Moody himself is more clear in his writing.

It is a debate of long standing on the left and within the tradition that the rank and file strategy represents. For some, the the purpose of rank and fileism has always been to challenge labor officialdom as a check on the potential power of workers, and to challenge the tendency of this layer to deploy union power in its own interests rather than those of members or the working class as a whole. In this view, officials will, without both ideological commitment and significant pressure from below, always tend toward cutting deals with bosses and politicians, and to prefer member mobilization and show strikes to any potential for autonomous networks of organizing and power or political control among and by the ranks. The more conservative understanding has been that the conservatism of the bureaucracy is primarily a political problem, one which can in the necessary cases, be combated and redirected through member democracy.

The joining of the rank and file strategy to a Labor for Bernie electoral push presents a vision of rank and file decidedly in line with the second view, taking up a strategy replacing union officials who endorse Democratic Party centrists or even Republicans with new leadership that can get behind Bernie, and which requires for its biggest electoral impact an alliance with unions that are progressive on the outside but which might be totally internally undemocratic and present stark limits on rank and file workers' power, oppose or dampen shop floor activity and strike action.

Further, building the broadest labor coalition for electoral unity entails, at best, an agreement-to-disagree about which candidates should be endorsed and under what conditions, now that Bernie is out of the running. Most, if not all, unions – whether rank and file-led or otherwise, are under heavy pressure to revert to the age-old accommodation with Democratic Party candidates who openly endorse austerity, privatization, and the like, backed by bosses. The alternative, a break with the Democratic Party, rooted in a labor movement bloc, will be much more difficult to impossible to ever achieve if bureaucratic layers are able to constrain and limit the ongoing strike wave, also eliminating or limiting the potential for winning demands directly or organizing formal political power independent from the Democratic Party. Is it still possible that a working-class movement can confront the fast-approaching endgame of now daily threats by both Biden and Trump to much more directly and harshly confront the militancy of the streets and workplaces, all under the guise of defeating the nefarious influences of “foreign actors,” “anarchists,” and “communists”? (I certainly hope the answer is ultimately in the affirmative.)

We are forced to wonder if workers, socialists, or the labor movement would be more or less prepared for this moment of post-Bernie crisis if a different strategy or a even simply a different version of the rank and file strategy had been taken up more widely over the last 4-5 years. This particularly given the DSA's important role in structuring the discontent of teachers in West Virginia and elsewhere; following the initial declaration by the confounded leaders of the AFT and NEA of a “victory,” which was both unacceptable to members and unsigned even by the state legislators, *Jacobin* and DSA leaders gamely celebrated this “victory,” even attributing it to the in fact recalcitrant bureaucrats of the teachers' unions.

When teachers and other education workers instead rejected the false victory in favor of turning an

already illegal strike into a wildcat, the same forces from the top pushed for a resolution as quickly as possible and at the level of what an old socialist might call the minimum program. Union leaders quickly learned, and in subsequent state actions enacted, a strategy of turning strikes into protests and pushing protests toward an agenda of sweeping “red states” with a “blue wave” of electing Democrats. The largest socialist organization in decades in the United States was unable or unwilling to devote significant resources to spreading the strike, while connections between teachers’ struggle and inchoate but widespread opposition to a wave of [abortion bans](#) and a racist [anti-gang” bill in Kentucky](#) were for the most part not developed. As a result, West Virginia’s achievement of statewide raises not only for teachers but for all public sector employees represented the high water mark for victory in the teachers’ red spring. A further analysis of the balance sheet of the still developing teacher struggle will be necessary to assess what we know about the evolution of the rank and file strategy in practice. Its certainly the arena that makes the strongest case for the DSA’s rank and file strategy today – at the same time, it is also the sector that makes the strongest case for the importance and long-ranging long-lasting effects of independent socialist organizing as member-workers. Unfortunately that full explication will have to wait for another essay.

As we consider the possibilities for a rank and file strategy *On New Terrain*, we have to not only update the strategy on paper but in practice, *in situ*, as part of a new flowering of socialist organization, openness, and commitment that represents promise and peril for the strategy. Can the strategy, taken up by a new and growing layer of socialists, transform not only the workers’ movement but the socialist one? Can it build its rank and file-oriented slice as a large but non-sectarian left pole for a broader socialist movement? Can DSA itself confront its history as a vehicle for the labor bureaucracy and the continued assertion of a bureaucratic and crude class reductionism by influential and unaccountable socialist influencers in their organization’s name? What is or might be the influence of rank and files outside the DSA and distinct from strategies for Democratic party realignment or the “dirty break”? Is there any more (or perhaps less?) hope for a realizable explication of the relationships between shop floor organizing, class independence and socialist politics and party implied in Moody’s original strategy? At what point does socialist organization and strategy become, again, the object of the rank and file strategy rather than itself simply a pool for locating and sustaining organizers committed to working on the shop floor? What, if any, strategy might have better prepared the DSA, or even simply rank and file organizers of all stripes to respond to the ongoing uprising for Black Lives, as an opportunity for building on existing organization and how might socialists now do that anyway? How could we still, as a class, and as socialists, organize to win the demands of the movement?

The answer to these questions depend in large part on the commitments and vision of the activists who now take up the banner. To that end, a careful reading of Moody both then and now, with an eye toward the opportunities that exist now but weren’t available to the Moody of 17 years ago, would be an excellent first, or, at least, second step. An electorally oriented workerism that imagines the Democratic Party as both the logical object and necessary conclusion to this politics has little relationship to Moody’s rank and file strategy in the context of his broader work, especially to the insights in *On New Terrain*, and even less to the potential for bottom-up, worker-led, socialist politics today.

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Footnotes

[1] Kim Moody (1997) *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy* (New York: Verso).

[2] Kim Moody (2017) *On New Terrain: How Capital is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War* (Chicago: Haymarket)