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What the Revival of Socialism in America Means for the Labor Movement

BY Shaun Richman and Bill Fletcher, Jr.

Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Shaun Richman are contributing writers to In These Times*, as well as veterans of the labor and socialist movements. Both have worked for several labor unions, with Fletcher having served as a senior staffer in the national AFL-CIO and Richman as a former organizing director for the American Federation of Teachers. Both came of age during different eras of left politics. In this conversation, the two writers and organizers examine what a revived socialist movement could mean for unions—and the broader push for workers' rights and dignity.*

Shaun Richman: We're in a political moment when tens of thousands of Americans are declaring themselves to be socialists and joining and paying dues to socialist organizations. It's not just Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), although DSA is growing the largest and the fastest. The entire alphabet soup of the Left, basically any socialist group that isn't a weirdo cult, is experiencing an influx of new members and activity. In the context of the "Organize or Die!" union push of the last 30 years, this is new and potentially a game-changer. There are now organized socialist groups that exist in significant numbers and are trying to figure out what their labor program should be, how they relate to a labor movement, and how they can be helpful. And it's not obvious what they should do. Bill, what are the opportunities and pitfalls, and what does this growth mean for labor?

Bill Fletcher: It is useful to contrast this growth with what took place in the Left during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Left, at that point, saw a project that was necessary within the working class. And so there was a whole wave of people, myself included, that went into workplaces, if we weren't already there, as a way of organizing to rebuild a vibrant labor movement and to lay the foundation for a working-class-based radical political movement that would, hopefully, result in the construction of a new political party of the socialist Left.

That's different from what I'm seeing right now, which is the growth in interest in socialism, broadly defined, among a large number of people, particularly younger people. That is fantastic! But it is far from clear that they are wedded to a class project, except in a very abstract sense. And that difference is fundamental. It's not just an ideological question; it is also a strategic question. Where and how does a reborn socialist movement build a base?

One of the tendencies that we began to see in the late 1980s and early 1990s was an orientation among many younger leftists that assumed that the work they did organizing the working class had to be done via staff positions: staff for unions and staff for workers centers. So the workplace-based organizing became less and less of a priority and activity. We need to unpack this a bit.

Shaun: One challenge of organizing workers currently is that most people out there—even union members—don't really understand what a union is. They understand them as some sort of abstraction. The way some budding left critics of unions talk, it's like, "Well why won't 'the unions' break with the Democratic party?" Or, "Why are they so loyal to the companies they represent?" This reflects a lack of understanding of how heavily regulated unions are and the structural trap that unions find themselves in.

Another problem is the one you note. I've been doing a lot of recruiting of new union organizers in the last decade. There are these moments that flare up when you see tremendous interest from new activists: maybe it's Wisconsin, maybe it's the Chicago teachers' strike. There was definitely a big influx of new organizers coming out of the 2008 Obama campaign. People had that lightbulb moment when they wanted to get more involved in social justice, and they decided to go straight for a staff job at a union.

Almost no one paused to ask how to stand in place and fight for a union at the job they were in. And one of the pitfalls of the staff model is, obviously, there just aren't that many staff jobs, and they're dwindling. The opportunity of an organized socialist movement is that it provides a different way to get involved and to do something at your workplace, or find a new workplace where you have comrades and you can maybe start pushing in the right direction and laying the seeds for labor's next uprising.

Bill: Left politics need to unite with workers—and the lives and activities of workers. And there are different ways that that's going to happen. One aspect of that work is the building of unions.

But even when it comes to building unions—if you think back on the work that the Left did in the 1930s, whether it was the communists, the Trotskyists or whatever—the process of building those unions was a major priority of the Left. And cadres were made available to help to build unions. In addition, building a presence of the Left in the working class goes beyond the workplace and includes communities. That's what today's socialist left really needs to be thinking about.

Shaun: I prefer to look at the 1920s. First of all, from a power perspective, they seem very analogous to our era. But there's also an element of optimism: If this is our era is the 1920s, what can we do to get to our 1934?

There were really interesting projects during the 1920s socialist Left that helped change the environment and made the 1930's uprising possible. One is the Trade Union Education League (TUEL). They developed a smart way of addressing the problems of union structure—how the craft model sometimes got in the way of solidarity. They also got past that earlier Wobbly thrust of just quitting the AFL to create new "perfect" organizations that would compete against and "defeat" the craft unions.

"Amalgamation" was the watchword, and the principle was that we can put structural rigidity aside while we figure out a model where every union that claims jurisdiction gets those members, as long as all members are fighting within the same collective bargaining framework. But the important thing is to go into the unions where the workers are, instead of being the perfect union hanging off to the side. "Go where the workers are," seems to be a pretty good and long-standing rule of socialist organizing.

They still wound up getting accused of being "dual unionists" by existing leadership, which felt threatened by these folks who were organizing as caucuses. Many were expelled from those unions. The peril of that sort of model— which modern-day socialists fall into a bit too easily– is succumbing to knee jerk oppositionalism. Without a real analysis of the structural, legal and organizing challenges to unions, you fall into the mindset of, "If only this person was in charge instead of that person," or, "If only these people weren't the ones on staff but these other people were." Then you're just "the opposition."

First of all, we've got at least 30 years of experience here, where just replacing folks at the top, or just replacing the staff with more "dedicated" people, is clearly not the breakthrough strategy. But more strategically, if DSA or if any of these groups are able to be painted as knee-jerk opposition caucus joiners, you could very quickly find yourself blacklisted or marginalized, and that would be a waste of this opportunity. Which is not to say don't ever engage in opposition (if you can win). But, it's telling how much people point to the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), because it's the best example of where new leadership was needed. That new leadership organized the membership in a real and meaningful way and has improved the state of the union. But the fact that that's the example everyone talks about should tell you that it's the exception that proves the rule.

Bill: There's an assumption implicit in what you were saying that I would challenge. Based on my own experience, I can tell you that one does not have to be in direct opposition in order for the traditionalists or the pragmatists in the leadership of organized labor to red-bait or otherwise marginalize you. We have had segments of the Left that decided to tail the union leadership in order to—in their own view—build alliances. In other cases, they may have hoped that, through building such a relationship, they would increase the opportunity to be in a position of influence and power.

On the one hand, you have the opposition caucuses. As you note, they can be very sectarian and unproductive. Although in cases like Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and the reform movement that took over the CTU, they can be really important. The challenge for leftists is that even in the absence of a reform caucus, to the extent that you're trying to push the envelope, even when you have absolute displays of loyalty, you still can be perceived as a threat. So people should not think, "Well I'm not going to be a sectarian ass, and therefore people will listen to me, I'll be able to serve a productive role." I wish it worked that easily.

I have argued for a long time that people on the Left can't treat the labor movement as a panacea nor as some sort of hideous creature. It's complicated. It is also a strong argument for why we need Left organizations rather than leftists relying only upon themselves as individuals.

Shaun: Working for unions as staff is not for everybody and shouldn't be the default position. If you can do it, the pay and benefits will be good, you'll learn some stuff, but you also might hit a limit of what you can learn. The role of movement is to help you to figure out where the next smart place to go is.

Back to the TUEL, one thing they did is that they didn't just focus on where unions already existed, which—like today—was in only a handful of industries that they were able to hold onto. It was clear there were growth industries where workers had to be organized, but there weren't any unions that were seriously trying to organize—the auto factories being the best example. So TUEL activists took jobs in those auto factories and focused on just getting the job, making friends, becoming trusted co-workers and showing shop floor leadership. All the while, they were puzzling out with each other what serious union organizing would look like in mass production factories. And they wound up being a very crucial base of cadre when the UAW came along in the 1930's.

So one of the exciting things about there being organized socialist groups is the idea of salting. When I was running the AFT's charter schools organizing program, I probably had a different take on this. Back then, I needed folks who were ideologically committed and willing to go work at a non-union charter school and help us organize it. An inside organizer makes a massive difference.

My wife salted a charter school, and she managed to organize the place in three weeks. But now that I'm not currently running any union organizing division, what I see more is that the members of these socialist organizations already have jobs in the industries that we know we need to organize but nobody currently knows how.

I'm sure there are a ton of IT workers and freelancers who are now card-carrying socialists. I think salting looks more like tapping into socialist membership networks on the job. Find each other, and get a book club together, start reading together, start meeting together, and start thinking what would workplace action look like. Don't model this on what the current unions look like, because however we're going to organize IT, it's never going to look like the UAW. The industry is just vastly more complicated by design.

Bill: The same model was implemented in various forms and on a different scale in the 1970s, but the Left as a whole was smaller then. Let's dissect this word "salting" a little bit further. There's salting that refers to sending people into workplaces in order to lay the foundation for new organizing of a union, and then there's salting in the sense of in-shop organizing that aims at playing a transformative role within existing unions.

When I went to work at a shipyard in the 1970s, there was already a union, but it was a very conservative union. With other people on the Left, we built a reform movement that aimed to

change the power situation within that local. We need people who are prepared to go into workplaces where there's already organization. But we also need people who are going to be going into new places.

Here's where it gets more complicated. Much of what needs to be organized is very low-paid work. The entry-level rate at the shipyard was low, but it was still something that I could live on. Many people shy away from salting precisely because of this. It's not an obstacle, but it is a challenge.

Shaun: Much of this depends on who is willing and able. If you're a footloose college senior who has that freedom and isn't tied down by a family or a mortgage, who can take a front-desk job at a non-union hotel, that's a special kind of help you can provide. But given just how much of the economy is currently unorganized, I think a lot of people are already in jobs that need to be organized. Again, I'm sure that there are tons of card-carrying socialists who work in IT. They shouldn't leave that job. They should stay and fight, and they can contribute tremendously by finding each other and by thinking about what are the actions, the concerted activity, that we could take together that can demonstrate some power and inspire more coworkers to join.

I became a teenage socialist in the 1990s. I only heard about that 1970s push to "go into industry" as a cautionary tale. What I heard was the Socialist Workers Party told all their members who had built careers as academics or as writers to go into industry—basically upend your professional life. It kind of tore the party apart and left it as a tiny sect after what had been a fairly rich history of movement building.

And, yes, sacrifices will have to be made, but I do think that we have an opportunity just because of how disorganized the economy currently is. Many people are already in a job that needs to be organized, and just by talking, reading, thinking and planning small actions with comrades, they move the needle.

Bill: The role of organization becomes very important here—specifically, the type of organization. One of the things about the Communist Party in the 1920s and 1930s was that they had an analysis of strategic sectors of the economy—mining, steel and auto—that needed to be organized.

One of the central tasks of organized socialists, as opposed to individuals, is to really examine the economy and think about where we need to be, including organizing the unemployed and informal sector. Not just organizing unions, but how do you build a left presence in these sectors? Do we have to do it in a different way? Is this one of the reasons or one of the ways that we need to be thinking about workers centers, for example, or other organizational vehicles, as ways of penetrating sections of the workplace that we haven't been otherwise able to penetrate?

Shaun: That takes us to one of the other left projects of the 1920s that we need a 21st century model for: the labor colleges that sprang up. I'm thinking of places like Brookwood Labor College in upstate New York, Work People's College in the Midwest and Commonwealth College down south. The model of the schools was, first of all, everyone was in the room: people from different industries, different unions, or non-union workers, people with different educational attainments. The point was to step back from the daily work and to evaluate—with no sacred cows—the law, the union structure and the industries.

Our current labor colleges are great. I'm a big fan of the University of Massachusetts Union Leadership and Activism (ULA) program for doing some of this, but it's a masters program so it's sort of inherently elitist. We need PhDs in the room with high school dropouts as equals, electricians in the room with non-union IT workers, teachers in the room as students. It shouldn't be tied to college credits, although if you can find a way to incorporate that, that's always helpful.

The way labor education is funded now makes it hard to not have sacred cows. The 1920s labor college leaders, like A.J. Muste and Kate Richards O'Hare, really drove a process of never simply accepting "it is what it is" as an answer to anything. They were crucial for getting past the abstraction of craft union structure versus pure industrial union, and coming up with newer models of worker representation and protest. They examined critical questions: How do we not

let our picket lines get smashed? What if we locked ourselves in instead of letting ourselves get locked out?

As you noted, these conversations can be threatening to union leadership, but it's not like someone made a mistake. It's not like William Green and John L Lewis and Sidney Hillman all sat down at a table and took a vote on the best framework for collective bargaining. The combination of exclusive representation, the duty of fair representation, agency fee, and enterprise-level bargaining is the product of a series of historical accidents. We need to understand how this came about by accident, how this system worked, when and why it worked, and start to develop ideas about how to replace it. Increasingly, it's not working for us. Certainly it's not working for the non-union segment of the economy, which is most of it now.

Bill: The AFL-CIO went through a process of building a National Labor College (NLC), when John Sweeney took over as president of the AFL-CIO in 1995. It was a controversial decision, because there were many labor academics and labor studies programs that felt threatened by the idea of what the NLC might mean for their respective programs. It was very unfortunate. That eventually calmed down.

There was the question of whether education was mainly going to be found at brick-and-mortar institutions that labor unions set up, like the NLC or the United Auto Workers' iconic site at Black Lake Michigan. Alternatively, there was the question of whether the education offered by unions would be through programs and initiatives that were getting out into the field and developing programs where the members were. Another question was whether it should be a BA and Masters, versus developing our own West Point where we would be training the upcoming 'generals' and 'colonels' of the movement. That discussion never came to fruition.

Through cost overruns and several other problems—including the split in the AFL-CIO, which led some unions that had split off to stop using the Labor College (apparently because they wanted it to collapse)—the Labor College found itself in a crisis.

But there was also a lack of consensus at the leadership level as to what priority it should be and whether it was worth the expense. Leaders of affiliated unions, by and large, went along with Sweeney's proposal, but I'm not even sure that Trumka was all that enthusiastic about it. This lack of consensus, I have concluded, was the ultimate demise of the NLC.

All of the educational efforts that you're pointing to during the early part of the 20th century—and to which I would add the Highlander Center—were central in terms of offering advanced education for labor intellectuals. I use that term very broadly and do not mean just labor academics. These institutions helped to train and shape the thinking of people who would play major leadership roles in the new labor movement. At this point we need to look at the form and content that worker-centered, movement-building education should possess.

Shaun: Certainly, in the year 2017 it's folly to try to run labor education out of the unions. They're facing an existential threat from Janus. Nobody has an appetite to fund it. So it has to be independent. Is it done at the universities—at UMass, Murphy, Rutgers and the rest? Yes, obviously, and all of those institutions are doing good work. Some are finding ways to grow in this moment and to bring in new revenue to do interesting programs. But there is still a need to build an institution of labor education that is independent and not based on a traditional tuition and credit model. Book clubs, like the *Jacobin reading groups*, seem like a really smart thing to do right now. All you have to do is find a library reading room, or somebody's living room, and buy or borrow the books. So it's fairly low investment to get started.

But those have to start getting connected to each other, so that the conversation that's happening in the Bronx gets connected to the conversation that's happening in Chicago and in Raleigh-Durham. But if you have maybe 100,000 card-carrying socialists putting money into a pot, you start to be able to develop something that possibly looks like the Socialist Party's Rand School, to go even further back in time.

Back to the 1920s, the third interesting project to me that cries out for a 21st century analogue is the International Labor Defense organization that was led by James P. Cannon. Back then, union leaders would get jailed on trumped-up charges of conspiracy, like inciting riots on picket lines.

The infrastructure to raise money for bail and defense lawyers was a literal life saver. We're not yet facing those kinds of fights, thankfully, but folks lose their jobs in organizing all the time. And there's a lot of money that needs to be raised. The interesting question is what does an International Labor Defense look like in the GoFundMe era? The Silicon Valley capitalists have created the technological infrastructure that we can either use or steal.

I've put out this report, *Labor's Bill of Rights*, which argues that we should be using more constitutional challenges to the laws that really restrict workers' activities, which will involve breaking the law. Look at the Jimmy Johns workers in the Twin Cities area who got fired for hand-billing about the fact that they could not take a sick day unless they found a coworker to replace them. The company's rule was come into work sick if you can't find someone to fill in for your shift. They put out leaflets making common cause with the customers. I would want to know if the people making my sandwich were possibly contagious. The activists got fired, and now we have a Circuit Court decision that says that they deserved to be fired because they were being disloyal to their employer.

There is a major black hole in free speech law around workers. We're going to need more fights like this, and I would point out that was an Industrial Workers of the World organizing effort, which suggests the value of outsider activist strategies and relatively small organizations that think differently and are nimble. But you can't ask somebody to take a risk like that unless you can offer them some sort of support, and again that's where fundraising for workers' defense as a socialist project would be huge. Folks are already doing this, but there's an opportunity to do it in a more organized manner, tap into social media and make it more visible.

Bill: There are actually two issues here. There's the question of organizing legal defense and the broader matter of strategy in the workplace around authoritarianism. It's conceivable that a 21st century version of International Labor Defense could be constituted. There are organizations that take on some cases, particularly around union democracy issues, like the Association for Union Democracy. The problem is that you will quickly encounter "donor fatigue." This is something that we see particularly in responses to disasters. People can be affected in the beginning, and then after a while they start getting tired. And so you have to be very careful about how you move such efforts. One should not assume that each and every injustice will result in a mass campaign. It's going to have to be very strategic. And that will mean that some people will get help, and other people won't.

But the deeper strategic and programmatic issue is something that I think that organized labor and much of the left have largely abandoned. That is what Barbara Ehrenreich talked about back in 2000 and what Rand Wilson have been raising since the 1980s: the authoritarian nature of the non-union workplace. The fact is that workers give up their rights when they're walking into non-union workplaces. I am convinced that taking on that struggle would be electrifying for several reasons. One is the idea of being protected against wrongful termination means more than the current situation in the United States, where if one gets fired in a non-union workplace, one has few options other than trying to get unemployment compensation.

"Just cause" dismissal means developing institutions, such as labor courts, as you have in much of the rest of the world. Now at the level of strategy, it's seemed to me for a long time that this is something that should be pursued, particularly in so-called "right to work" states. We should be advocates of rights at work and use that to flip the script.

Shaun: I agree, and we're in a moment when these notions are bubbling up—at elite levels, at least. First of all, for any socialist book clubs that are starting out there, I would highly recommend Elizabeth Anderson's new book *Private Government*. It makes a really clear and fairly deep argument about why we don't even see how we give up our rights when we walk through the boss' door and why that needs to change. There was a write-up in *The New Yorker* this weekend, and she had a piece in *Vox*: It's getting out there. I included Just Cause as one of the ten parts of *Labor's Bill of Rights*, and I'm getting some interesting feedback about that.

Bill: Like what?

Shaun: I had a conversation with the staff of a well-respected progressive in Congress, where they expressed interest in doing something as bold as introducing a Just Cause bill, particularly if

it would spark state-level efforts. I heard that some of the alt-labor groups in California were thinking about it as a potential ballot initiative after we saw in November that progressive ballot initiatives win even when right-wing politicians win. When you put workers' rights and workers' pay on the ballot, workers are going to vote for that.

There are two bits of pushback that I get on this. One is folks say, people actually assume that they can't be fired for just about any reason, and they only find out after they lose the job. I'm not sure that that's the case. First of all we're seeing a lot of Nazis getting fired after they had their pictures taken at Charlottesville. We see people get fired for things they say on social media. But there's still that pushback that workers don't understand they don't have these rights. Well that seems like a project of popular left education, to make sure workers understand what their rights are (and aren't).

The other pushback is a feeling among a lot of union people that if every worker had job protections, why would workers form unions? And that's just a lack of imagination. If every worker in a state had just cause protection, and there was some sort of recourse to a labor court, or arbitration, then you have lots of workers who would understand the good sense of paying for representation. You have right now millions and millions of workers who would like to join a union tomorrow but can't, because they need to convince a majority of their coworkers to vote for it. But if there were just cause protections, I think there are tons of unions that could go out there and say, join us and we'll be there for you.

And then there are all these other things you get by being a part of the union, including, one would hope, some more popular education around economics and workers power. So it seems like a potential pathway back not only to worker power but to union power. And again we're in a moment when people are just starting to talk about it. So we should push on it, so yeah it's time that we joined Europe on this.

Bill: Exactly. Not just Europe–other parts of the world. The objection that you heard, I've been hearing since the 1980s, when I first got involved in the issue of wrongful termination. Trade unionists were saying, why would people join unions? As if that's the major obstacle that we face now. I mean, it's so absurd, so small-minded, that it almost doesn't deserve a response. But I think that your response is a very good one.

Shaun: It gets back to having a structural critique. We should be looking at what is keeping us from growing into areas of the economy where we need to be, what is diminishing union power, and we need to think about breakthroughs. A lot of the breakthroughs have to come through changing the law, and breaking out of this model of NLRB-certified, enterprise-level bargaining. I'm not saying get rid of it, but it can't be our model for growth. We're not going to grow back to 33 percent union density through that model—not with card check, not even with repealing Taft-Hartley. We're just not going to grow to the high-water mark of union density under a model collective bargaining centered around atomized workplaces.

We need something that gets us to have a voice in industry, and in entire sectors, all at once. And sectoral bargaining—or sectoral rule-making, even—is another idea I see bubbling up, also at more elite levels, in think tanks and labor colleges. But it is something that workers and members of socialist book clubs should be talking about too.

The pushback is that it's pie-in-the-sky when we had a triple-crown Democratic government and couldn't even get card check passed. But opportunities for change sometimes come at you faster than you expect. God forbid 20 million workers sat down at the job tomorrow and created the crisis that would actually get Congress to change our labor laws. What would we win? Card check, because that's the last idea we put on the table? We should be discussing ideas that are big, that are utopian, that seem hopeless. Otherwise, when the moment arises to actually make a gain, we're going to be caught flat-footed.

Bill: Absolutely. You know we have to be advancing new and exciting ideas. And one of the ideas

that is important for organizers to appreciate and certainly for the left to appreciate, is that when people are actually inspired by visionary notions, they are capable of extraordinary accomplishments. When there is a lack of inspiration, something different happens, and that is that people tend to fall back into their everyday lives, and their everyday problems, and get held down, smothered by them. If we're attempting to build a new movement and going on the counter-offensive, we must ensure some level of inspiration. And that doesn't mean providing all the answers, it doesn't mean detailing the ultimate utopia. It means that we're laying out an idea about how change can happen and the difference that it actually can make.

Shaun: I agree, and that might be a good note to end on. This moment presents an opportunity to gain some new ambition and to think a hell of a lot bigger than we've been thinking for decades now.

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Shaun Richman is a former organizing director for the American Federation of Teachers. His Twitter handle is @Ess_Dog. Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a talk show host, writer and activist. You can follow him on Twitter, Facebook and at http://www.billfletcherjr.com.

More information about Shaun Richman and Bill Fletcher, Jr.