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Trade Unions

What is the Rank-and-File Strategy, and Why Does It Matter?

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We can't win socialism without workers fighting back. The rank-and-file strategy gives us the tools to do that.

Socialism's recent resurgence has revived core debates about socialist politics and strategy: what do socialists want, and how do we get there? Whether figuring out how socialists should relate to electoral politics, how and to what extent socialists should push for reforms from the state, how socialists should engage with broader social movements, or simply what it means to be a socialist, these questions all have a greater urgency now, simply because what socialists do these days matters a lot more.

These debates come freighted with history, making it hard for newcomers to discern what's at stake and what the disagreements are about. This is certainly the case when it comes to discussing something called the "rank-and-file strategy," a term that has recently achieved greater currency.

This is in no small part due to a pamphlet put out by the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) in late 2018 called "Why Socialists Should Become Teachers." The pamphlet plainly argues (in bold red letters no less) "that socialists should take jobs as teachers (and other school-based workers) for the political, economic, and social potential the industry holds."

Fox News and other conservative media outlets seized on the pamphlet, taking it as prima facie evidence that socialists were actively plotting to infiltrate public schools in order to indoctrinate America's youth. But beyond the alarmist headlines in right-wing media, the pamphlet rekindled a long-running discussion on the Left about socialists' strategic orientation towards the workplace, the working class, and the labor movement.

As commonly understood, the idea of the rank-and-file strategy boils down to the core argument of the YDSA teacher pamphlet, namely that socialists should make a concerted effort to find jobs in sectors deemed strategically important for building working-class power. Sometimes, a corollary idea is that socialists should be wary of becoming part of the labor bureaucracy either by running for union office or taking jobs as union staff.

Taking rank-and-file jobs can certainly be part of a rank-and-file strategy. Likewise, adopting a critical assessment of the opportunities and limitations available to elected union leadership and staff can flow from a rank-and-file strategy. But these actions describe tactical decisions aimed at achieving a strategic goal, given a specific context. They are not the strategy itself.

Understanding what the rank-and-file strategy is, and why it matters, requires taking a step back from such tactical decisions and focusing on how it fits into a strategic vision for building socialism.

What It Is

The rank-and-file strategy is: 1) an assessment of the core challenges facing socialists today; and 2) a strategic framework for addressing those challenges. At bottom, it's an effort to grapple with the central question that socialists operating in non-revolutionary times have faced: how best do we bring about a socialist society?

What is the Rank-and-File Strategy, and Why Does It Matter?

For Marxists, the answer lies with the working class, the only class that has the power to overthrow capitalism and transform society. But if socialists have learned anything from the past 150 or so years, it's that "the working class" as a coherent actor capable of bringing about revolutionary change is not something that just happens. Rather, it's something that must be created.

So the question then becomes: how best to form the working class into a revolutionary agent and make it fit to rule?

As organizations whose purpose is to organize workers as workers in the place where they have the most potential power — the workplace — unions almost by definition must play a key role in this process. However, unions are also a limited vehicle for transforming the working class into a revolutionary agent.

That's because their very existence affirms and reinforces capitalist class society. As organizations which primarily negotiate wages, benefits, and working conditions with employers, unions only exist in relation to capitalists. This makes them almost by definition reformist institutions, designed to mitigate and manage the employment relationship, not transform it.

Still, if something recognizable as "the working class" is going to develop into a force capable of bringing about a socialist society, labor unions are going to be an essential part of that process.

The working class can only develop the consciousness and skills needed to transform society through active struggle with the capitalist class, and the workplace is the most direct and obvious site of that struggle. Without unions, individual workers are isolated and weak, and more vulnerable to be divided along lines of race, gender, religion, region, immigration status, and more.

Unions give workers a platform to wage class struggle in a coordinated and sustained way, in the process developing the capacities necessary for future fights. That's why many socialists rightly spend a lot of time thinking about and actively working to strengthen unions.

The Militant Minority

But then the question becomes: how best should socialists work to strengthen unions?

Proponents of the rank-and-file strategy argue that socialists' central focus should be on identifying and developing a layer of rank and file, i.e., workplace-based, leadership that can organize in the workplace on a day-to-day basis. This day-to-day organizing plays a crucial role in creating workers' sense of being part of something bigger — not just a union, but a working class — that is capable of fighting, winning, and ultimately ruling.

This layer, sometimes called a "militant minority," is explicitly not the loudest, most radical people on the job. Nor is it made up entirely of committed, self-identified socialists.

Rather, it is composed of respected, trusted, and militant shop-floor leaders, people known as reliable sources of information and advice who are capable of moving their peers into action. Socialists have played key roles in cultivating, organizing, and sometimes leading militant minorities, but always as part of broader coalitions.

This strategic focus on building a militant minority comes from an historical analysis of when and how workers have

won in the past. While it has been far from a guarantee of victory, strong workplace-based organization has been an essential component of the victories that have occurred, most notably in the 1930s, but more generally over the past 150 years.

Not coincidentally, closer examination of these historical victories shows that in almost every case, the workplace organizing was led by socialists of different stripes. They were the hardest fighters, the most dedicated organizers, and the ones that most actively built unions' cultures of solidarity — a necessary precursor of forming the working class as an historical actor.

Up until the 1940s, the relation between labor unions, socialists, and the militant minority ebbed and flowed, but remained fairly organic. That's because socialists didn't simply relate to the working class; they were an integral part of the working class.

Indeed, every left movement in the US up to that point was overwhelmingly based in the working class. Concretely speaking, this meant that there was an existing layer of socialists and other workplace-based leaders ready to serve as a militant minority when the situation called for it.

Severing the Labor-Left Link

That changed after World War II. The combination of the US labor leadership's incorporation into the New Deal coalition starting in the 1930s, amplified by the McCarthyism of the 1940s and the 1950s, severed the historical link between labor and the Left.

Most socialists and communists were expelled from the main union federations, and without them, the broader layer that made up the militant minority was largely wiped out too.

Without that militant minority, US unions became much more bureaucratized and conservative. When rank-and-file upsurges did flare up in the 1960s, they generally remained unfocused and failed to achieve long-term gains. Where militant unions did develop, as in parts of the newly organized public sector, they were consistently blocked by the more dominant, conservative factions within labor.

Meanwhile, an increasingly frustrated student-based New Left was becoming more radicalized through the 1960s and the 1970s, and more aware of the need to ally with a broader historical agent: the working class. However, unlike previous generations of socialists, this generation was the first which was not organically based in the working class. They were the first to have to ask the question of how socialists should relate to the working class as something largely outside of them.

So, the key question that socialists then faced became: how best should socialists rebuild the link between labor and the Left?

For some in what could loosely be called the "post-Trotskyist" tradition, such as the International Socialists (IS) and later Solidarity, the answer was to focus on rebuilding the missing militant minority, that broad layer of workplace-based leadership within the working class. They understood this as a long-term project, aimed at repairing decades of historical damage to the labor-left link. This was the origin of what we know today as the rank-and-file strategy.

Proponents of the rank-and-file strategy differed from some, most notably leaders in organizational precursors of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), who sought to strengthen the labor-left link by seeking alliances with more progressive elements of the union bureaucracy rather than building workplace organization or rank-and-file leadership.

They also differed from other socialists, particularly those affiliated with the New Communist Movement that Max Elbaum discusses in *Revolution in the Air*, who largely saw workplace organizing as a venue for socialist cadre to engage in propagandizing for a revolution they believed to be imminent.

A Different Approach

Concretely speaking, the rank-and-file strategy informed IS members' actions in several ways. The aspect with which many are familiar is the so-called "turn to industry," whereby socialists who had radicalized as college students took rank-and-file jobs in strategically identified "core" industries such as auto, steel, transportation, and (to some extent) public education.

While they were far from the only socialists to do this, the rank-and-file strategy meant that they took a very different approach to their workplace organizing. Since the overarching goal was identifying and expanding the layer of workplace leadership that could build a powerful working-class movement, the organizing started from workplace issues, the day-to-day reality of class struggle that workers all faced.

The idea was to get workers used to fighting, to taking action to solve their problems collectively. This was a necessary first step towards increasing workers' sense of what is possible "and what they could be capable of."

Again, this differed from the approach of other groups that made a similar "turn to industry," who instead focused more on explicit propagandizing in the workplace around socialist ideas, with the goal of gaining adherents to their organization. The rank-and-file strategy was not about being the loudest and angriest people in the union. It was about building a layer of trusted workplace-based fighters.

Often "industrialized" radicals either formed or joined rank-and-file caucuses in their unions, the most well-known of which is Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). These were efforts to broaden local workplace struggles by linking together militant leaders and activists within the same union, with the goal of cohering a "militant minority" layer within the union.

Of course, this initial attempt at a "turn to industry" ran headlong into the realities of the Reagan recession of the early 1980s, which decimated employment in much of US basic industry. Many radicals lost their jobs, most of the rank-and-file caucuses collapsed (with the notable exception of TDU), and labor as a whole adopted even more of a defensive crouch.

Still, many of labor's small victories in subsequent years bore the imprint of this rank-and-file-strategy-informed organizing.

Another aspect of the rank-and-file strategy was the creation of Labor Notes, both as a magazine and an organizing project.

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Again, the idea was not to agitate around explicitly socialist demands, but to help build a militant minority capable of building power in the workplace. It did so by reporting on grassroots labor struggles both in the US and abroad, as well as connecting militant minorities from different workplaces and unions through conferences and workshops.

Additionally, their widely read books on fighting concessions and "team concept" production provided a theoretical foundation for countering prevailing strategies within labor that were contributing to their ongoing decline.

Forty years on, Labor Notes is stronger than ever, and provides a living link to the rank-and-file organizing of the 1970s. More importantly, it provides a forum for identifying and expanding today's militant minority.

Beyond the decidedly mixed results of the 1970s-era turn to industry, and the small but significant success of Labor Notes, the rank-and-file strategy informs an entire approach to building socialism. It's an approach that places the actually existing working class, in all its complexity and diversity, at its core.

It's an approach that seeks to shape that working class into a force capable of fighting for and winning deep social transformations. It's an approach that seeks to do so not by agitating from outside existing working-class organizations, or by finding sympathetic allies in politics and union leadership.

Rather, it seeks to do so by identifying and expanding a "militant minority," a layer of workplace-based leaders that can build up workers' sense of their collective capacity as a class.

The Rank-and-File Strategy Today

What does this mean for socialists organizing today? Of course, in areas and industries where there are strategically important opportunities, and individuals are available and willing, they should be encouraged to take rank-and-file jobs in these areas and industries. Already, we have seen the benefits of such an approach with the teachers strike wave of the past year, in which workplace-based socialists have played central roles.

But it's also important to recognize that coordinated efforts to encourage more socialists to take specific types of jobs is not the same thing as building the militant minority. It can be part of that building process, but ultimately the goal must be to expand the ranks of workplace-based militants and socialists, not simply to reallocate the existing set.

Likewise, a rank-and-file strategy requires a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between union membership, leadership, and staff, and socialists' role in each of them.

It's true that union leaders and staffers are often jittery about encouraging independent workplace leadership outside their direct control. Some see it as training their future opposition. But even for those union staff and leaders who are less narrowly self-interested, it risks undermining their ability to "deliver" their side of a bargain with management, as they can't be as certain that members will go along with what they negotiate.

Additionally, elected leaders and staff have a material interest in the survival of the union as an institution. This can lead them to shy away from militant struggles that might bolster workers' power, but at the risk of putting the union's long-term existence in jeopardy. Think of an illegal strike that could exact a punishing toll on an employer, but at the expense of leaving the union vulnerable to legal injunctions, and possibly subjecting members and leaders to fines and even jail time.

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Due to these structural constraints on their militancy, socialists who advocate a rank-and-file strategy are often critical of the role that union staff and leaders play (or fail to play) in building working-class fighting capacity. And while a strategy focused primarily on identifying and cultivating progressive union leadership is indeed misguided, this does not mean that union staff and leaders have no role to play in a rank-and-file strategy.

To the contrary, there are historical and current examples of unions where the staff and leadership seek to build strong workplace organization (too few, but they exist). As always, the central question to ask is whether the union leadership and staff help or hinder the development of a militant minority in their union.

But the rank-and-file strategy goes far beyond questions of who takes which jobs where, or how to relate to union staff and leadership. It's a theory of how to build power to change society in the interests of the vast majority.

That means that it's a strategic orientation that needs to permeate all aspects of socialist organizing. In figuring out priorities, the core question needs to be "Does this help build the independent fighting capacity of the working class?"

This is important when discussing work within unions. But it goes far beyond that, as the working class extends far beyond unionized workplaces.

Historically, workplace-based militant minorities and socialist organizations have played key roles in linking workplace struggles to broader community struggles. We can think of how Communists in the 1930s linked labor rights to civil rights and the fight against Jim Crow, or more recently, how reform caucuses in the Chicago and Los Angeles teachers' unions linked members' workplace issues like pay and class size to broader community issues like standardized testing and racial profiling.

There can be no socialism without a working class that can fight for it. After decades of demobilization and defeat, the US working class needs to build up its fighting capacity. A rank-and-file strategy is not going to fix this problem on its own, but it's a necessary part of the solution.

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