

**DSA Training: Labor 101**  
**Supplemented with 5 Handouts**  
**90 Minute Workshop**

Time limits for each section are pretty strict. Moderators need to take care to move on into next segment when time is up.

- **Introduction (3 minutes)**

Moderator should introduce the topic briefly with whatever is relevant for the local group: why this topic is important for their chapter, mention recent interactions with unions, mention that labor is one of national DSA's three priorities, whatever works.

And include: We want to encourage you to ask tough questions, raise points about things you know or think or your co-workers think or know about unions. Don't hold back for fear of appearing unsocialist or anti-union. We know most existing unions have warts, ranging from lack of democracy to unwillingness to confront employers. Some unions have racist histories while others have been on the front lines against racism. DSA members are committed to building a democratic and assertive labor movement.

- **Initial Discussion (10 minutes)**

Ask group to break into pairs to briefly consider this question: When have you personally seen or experienced a boss's arbitrary power? The incident can be small or large. How did you and/or your coworkers feel about that? Were there differing opinions? If you are a student/retired worker/self-employed, think of a prior job. If you've never had a job, think of someone you know. (Pairs confer for two minutes.)

*Moderator asks for a few examples; (two-three minutes).*

Moderator then asks pairs to consider: Have you ever experienced an instance of either an individual worker or co-workers cooperating to push back? Successful or unsuccessful? What happened? (Note people may come up with union or non-union examples.) Pairs confer for two minutes.

*Moderator asks for a few examples; (two-three minutes).*

Moderator indicates: When workers are organized in the workplace to push back against management's arbitrary power, that's unionism. It can make the difference between a miserable job and a bearable one. We're going to get into the nuts-and-bolts of what unions do and where the American labor movement is today, but first, let's back the conversation up a bit.

- **What's So Essential About the Working Class? (15 minutes)**

Moderator: although union leaders love to refer to their members as "middle class," socialists are always talking about the working class. What does the term "working class" mean to you?

*Call on a few people.* You are looking for something like "anyone who has to sell their labor to survive."

Moderator: For socialists, the working class is defined not by income or education or status or cultural proclivity—the "Non-College Whites" that pundits are always talking about—but by its relationship to capital.

Marx proposed 3 conditions that define the working class. [**Distribute handout #1– “Defining the Working Class.”**]

*Brief discussion of these definitions.*

Moderator: Using these criteria, a big majority of Americans are in the working class. Not just factory workers: transportation, warehousing, communications, hospital, hotel workers, and many more in services are all value-producing workers; they meet all three criteria. Government workers don't produce surplus value because they don't make profits, but public employees not in management are working class by virtue of their conditions of work that replicate those under capital—like postal workers, sanitation workers.

In any case, as Marx said, the question is not whether you as an individual create surplus value, it's what the working class as a whole does: “it is the collective worker, formed from the combination of the many specialized workers,” or “labor-power socially combined,” that produces surplus value. [*Note to moderator: The point is that individuals shouldn't get hung up on their own personal relationship to the means of production but understand the relationship of the working class as a whole.*]

Even highly educated workers such as teachers, nurses and other health care workers are subject to tight management control and speedup and as we have seen, more and more think of themselves as workers—and act like it—i.e., they are willing to organize collectively to confront management.

Today the working class is the majority of the population. The Communist Manifesto: “All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities [such as the bourgeoisie]. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.” Kim Moody estimates the working class as 84% of the population. Not quite the 99% but close enough.

But why do socialists put the working class at the center of our strategy, rather than other groups that might seem to be more oppressed or more radical, like the homeless or prisoners or students?

*Solicit answers.*

Moderator: The short answer is that the working class is the only class that has both an interest in overthrowing capitalism and the ability to withdraw its labor to create a crisis for capitalism and therefore move toward taking over. You need both.

The working class is unlike any other social grouping—it is the goose that lays the golden egg. It is the source of profits, because unless workers show up to do their work every day, no profits. Or in some cases, like teachers, the withdrawal of labor doesn't touch profits but it creates a very visible crisis in society that the powers-that-be feel they must address.

Workers are the only agent whose place in the *structure* of society enables them to bring the power centers to their knees.

So strategically it's not a question of who is the most oppressed but of “Who are the key players in this society that can bring the changes we need?”

For more on this, we've got another handout, meant for you to take home and read. [**Distribute Handout**

## #2, an excerpted version of Vivek Chipper’s article “**Why We Still Talk About the Working Class.**”]

But to grapple with what the working class might do, we’ve got to discuss what American workers have done to advance their interests in the past, and what the state of the American labor movement is today. So now let’s get into that conversation.

- **Unions: what they are and what they do (40 minutes)**

Moderator: To get what they are entitled to, workers have long understood that need to rely on their collective power. As one West Virginia teacher recently observed, “the first and most important lesson is for everyone to realize that our labor is ours first. It is up to us to give our labor, or to withhold it. As an individual that can mean continuing in an abusive job or quitting, but with organized workers standing together that can mean shutting [the workplace] down and demanding change.”

That’s meant that workers come together to form unions. A discussion of what’s going on in the labor movement today, and what exactly it is that unions do, can get complicated, so to help with that we’ve got two handouts. The first – “Snapshot: American Unions Today” – provides facts and figures on the current labor movement and some brief info about how unions operate. The second – “Why Unions Matter” – provides details on why unions are so central to our discussion today. [**Distribute Handout #3: “Snapshot: American Unions Today,” and Handout #4: “Why Unions Matter.”**]

You might already be familiar with what’s on these sheets, or perhaps all of it is helpful for you. Let’s briefly take a look at the “Snapshot” and see what leaps out.

*Discussion.* Depending on the interests of the participants, moderator might emphasize: the decline in unionization in America, and how it corresponds neatly with rising inequality. Where unions are concentrated today, and where they are not. Which groups are most represented. What the major unions are. How union structures differ. The decline in strike activity, and what that means.

Moderator: Now that we know where unions stand in terms of the numbers, let’s look at “Why Unions Matter.” This handout provides info about how unions affect the working class today, and it amplifies our earlier discussion about why the working class – and unions – are so vital for socialists.

*Discussion.* Moderator can ask: How do unions make things better for workers, both in terms of dollars and cents and in other crucial ways? Are there things on this sheet you didn’t know, or hadn’t thought about? Are there examples you can provide of “Why Unions Matter?” Does the last section, about socialists and unions, ring true for you?

- **The Labor Movement’s Decline (10 minutes)**

Moderator: maybe now everyone in this room recognizes the centrality of unions, both for improving conditions for the working class right now and in terms of fighting for a socialist future. And in fact these days most people agree, at least about the value of unions: unions now have a public approval rating of over 60%, and that’s higher than it’s been in a long time. But as the handouts indicate, union membership has been declining for decades, and has really taken a nosedive since the early 1980s. What are the factors that caused the labor movement to be in its current weakened state?

- ✓ First and absolutely foremost, a concerted employer offensive, one that can be traced back to at least the post-WWII era. The passage of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, with provisions that prohibited

secondary boycotts and sympathy strikes, allowed for “right-to-work” legislation, and required union officials to sign non-communist oaths, crippled organizing efforts and created, in essence, one region of the country that served as a union-free zone for employers. American corporations began to flee to the unorganized south, before offshoring out of the country altogether.

- ✓ Employers kept up the pressure, especially once Ronald Reagan took office; crushing the air traffic controllers’ strike signaled open warfare on organized labor. The postwar bargain, where unions seemed to be an accepted fixture of American industrial relations, was unilaterally cancelled by big business. It’s from the 1980s on that we see the really precipitous decline in union membership, while economic productivity and corporate profitability keep climbing. Where unions exist, employers threaten them by promising to move facilities elsewhere, extracting concessions and undermining union support; while organizing efforts are countered by a phalanx of high-priced union-busting consultants and legal teams. Employers routinely threaten and retaliate against union supporters. And of course it’s a double-edged sword: shrinking memberships mean smaller union budgets, therefore less to spend on organizing.
- ✓ The loss in American manufacturing jobs, a decades-old trend that has accelerated since 2000. A number of factors are involved here – trade policies that favored big corporations, automation aimed at cost-cutting and undercutting union labor – but the hollowing out of manufacturing gravely crippled the labor movement, since that’s the sector where America’s big unions had been concentrated.
- ✓ And in response to this corporate offensive America’s labor leadership has largely been caught flat-footed. Many union leaderships are now bloated and bureaucratized, out of touch with their memberships, unversed in and averse to militant activity, and in spite of all prevailing evidence still committed to the notion that “labor-management partnerships” will deliver the goods. They also remain wedded to the Democratic Party, but the Democrats, in hoc to corporate America and Wall Street just like the GOP is, cannot and will not save the labor movement.

Moderator: Anything I missed?

*Discussion.*

- **Renewed Hope? (5 minutes)**

Moderator: But American labor may be on the cusp of a revival, as we are lucky to be living in a time when it looks like there may be a resurgence of union struggles. The teacher strike wave of 2018 put the strike—labor’s most powerful weapon—back in our playbook. These strikes and mobilizations in WV, OK, KY, AZ, CO, NC— as well as huge mobilizations in state capitals — not only often won, but were also supported by parents and the public. Proving once again that people tend to support other people who stand up for themselves — standing up will bring you more support than the victim role.

In the fall of 2018, teachers were striking in Washington state and threatening to do so in Los Angeles, the second largest district in the U.S.

And in August 2018 we saw the victory in Missouri where voters rejected Right-to-work by the amazing margin of 2-1. Even if none of Missouri’s quarter-million union members had voted, right to work would still have been defeated, so the thousands of supporters out there knocking on doors had an effect. Only four Missouri counties voted for Clinton over Trump in 2016 but 100 of 115 counties voted *no* on right to work.

*Moderator can update with whatever recent evidence of labor revival.*

Even the *New York Times* recently heralded the “resurgent and effective labor activism” witnessed lately.

None of these victories would have been possible without unions acting like unions, even if that meant rank-and-filers taking over and doing it themselves, as the teachers did. These mobilizations contrast with the more usual inside-game, lobbying approach that too many unions have long relied on, especially in the public sector.

We may find that the next few years are the most exciting time to be a union member in a long time.

- **What You Can Do (7 minutes; includes general summing up)**

Moderator: Has anything we've talked about made you think about your own work life and how you might like to change it? [Like organizing a union, or getting a different job, or simply talking with co-workers about resisting something stupid.]

*Discussion.*

Moderator: Here are some further suggestions, with some places to go for more info. **[Distribute Handout #5: “How to Help Build a Dynamic, Democratic Labor Movement.”]**

*Discussion.*