

# Solidarity Discussion Bulletin

## 2015 Series #2

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**This bulletin contains**

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**Comments on the document, "A Renewed Strategic Perspective on Socialist Work in the Labor Movement"**

*The DB compiles scattered email submissions to better organize a democratic internal discussion and debate. The Solidarity email listserv is a free-flowing discussion and information medium. Not all emails are reprinted here. This bulletin houses materials by members submitted "for the record" to our ongoing discussions. If you have, prior to this notification, posted a contribution on our listserv that you would like to submit to the DB, send your contribution to [joannam@igc.org](mailto:joannam@igc.org).*

*"For the DB" must appear in the subject line of emails sent to the Solilist to designate material as a submission to the DB.*

## Comments on the document, “A Renewed Strategic Perspective on Socialist Work in the Labor Movement”

A work-in-progress begun in 2014 by Solidarity's labor commission with the aim of renewing the discussion about left labor strategy and evaluating the tradition of our "rank and file strategy."  
(This document is publicly accessible on our website, [solidarity-us.org](http://solidarity-us.org). It is found under Resources - Publications - Labor.)

### Remarks by Steve D., NYC

I don't know where things stand re discussion of “A Renewed Strategic Perspective on Socialist Work in the Labor Movement”. Assuming the discussion is on-going, below are some thoughts on it.

1. There is a vagueness that, at times, made it hard for me to grasp the analysis and/or the perspective. For example, on page 2, “Workplaces tend to be smaller and less socially cohesive...” Compared to what? More important, what does “less socially cohesive” mean? Is this the flip-side of being more diverse? What are the implications for our work?

Or, in the final para, the authors write about the need, “to raise the prospect of organized working-class power, beginning at the local level, and ultimately linked together by a state and national program.” Is this suggesting that we “raise the prospect” in an educational way at the local level, or do we see the possibility of working-class power existing at the local level? If the former, this recognizes the very narrow limits of our reach, but doesn't add much to elaborating a strategic perspective. If the latter, you can imagine the questions that follow.

2. There are also generic formulations substituting for analysis. For example, in the para already cited from page 1, the authors write, “While we do not want to overstate the positives, we nonetheless believe that they point to the potential for the development of politically independent, class-wide formations capable of offering meaningful resistance to capitalist austerity — if the Left can intervene effectively and democratically to move things in that direction.” This may be true, but I doubt there has been a labor document in the last 30 years that, no matter how low the level of struggle, didn't find something that pointed to the potential of offering meaningful resistance to capitalist austerity. Let's allow that we can always find something that points to that potential (we kind of have to believe that, right?), what's different now? What, if anything, has happened to make it likely the Left can intervene more effectively and democratically than it has in the past?

3. The analysis in the first two pages leads up to this statement that seems to be a central tenet of the document,

In our view, these developments signal the need—and the potential—to put class-wide movements and organizational forms at the center of a renewed perspective on revolutionary socialist labor work. We are fully aware that the development of class-wide movements linking political and workplace struggles is more characteristic of periods of rising struggle than periods of decline, such as the present. The challenge we face is that, given the depth of

capitalist restructuring, the political successes of neoliberalism, and the present relationship of forces, the narrow sectoral approach to unionism that remains dominant today has left unionized workers increasingly isolated from the broad working class, and unable to defend past gains, let alone make advances. Under these conditions, the labor movement can only build power by championing the working class as a whole — by posing its demands within a larger sociopolitical context, fighting for more universal goals (e.g. single-payer health care, livable wages), developing member self-activity, and forging genuine alliances with workers and working class organizations outside of the unions. As the debate rages about how to revive Labor, we should be clear that the only viable path forward is through rank and file struggles that consciously link the workplace and sectoral demands of union members to the needs of the entire working class.

How does the remark about this being a period of “decline” square with the observation in the 2nd para about the “sporadic emergence of more determined, bottom-up campaigns and struggles”? Of greater concern, this para seems to call for putting “class wide movements” at the center of our strategy because the times demand such organizations, despite the fact the authors “are fully aware” that such class-wide movements are not characteristic of periods such as the one we're in. In other words, we need to make these forms central because, well, because they need to be central.

I think I understand what it would mean to put class-wide *politics* at the center of a renewed perspective. We tried to do this, with uneven success, in *New Directions*. But, I don't get what it would mean to put class-wide *movements and organizational forms* there.

This might be clearer to me if the document was built upon a “fuller discussion, debate, and assessment” of the “work of the comrades who went into industry in [the 60s and 70s], and the movements they helped build” than this document provides. It's hard for me to judge the import of the strategic suggestions contained in this document without a clearer sense of the implicit assessment and critique of the work of the past 40 years.

4. Or, put another way, how is the following (from pg 6) different from perspectives presented by Solidarity in the past?

To summarize, a broader strategic perspective on socialist labor work is needed that clearly articulates the following points:

1. There are opportunities to advance broad, political, class-wide, anti-racist demands attached to militant, bottom-up campaigns;
2. These campaigns, begun at the local level, have the potential to radicalize workers, provide political education to those in the struggle, and impact the broader political environment, as varied as that environment may be in different regions of the country;
3. In this period, building such campaigns should be integrated with ongoing work in union caucuses and other rank and file structures, allowing socialists to advance strategic and political perspectives that provide an alternative to top-down bureaucratic functioning by building working class power in workplaces/shop floor and communities; and
4. In order to develop the full potential of emerging movements we must build a socialist Labor Left that is rooted in the activist layer of the working class and capable of leading class-wide campaigns and movements.

If these fit with perspectives adopted in the past (as I think they do), I think it's incumbent upon us to try to understand where we were relatively successful in carrying out this perspective (and why); where we were unsuccessful (and why); and what we should be doing differently in order to be more successful.

5. On page 4, the authors present a partial statement of the Rank and File Strategy. They write,

The Rank and File Strategy, with its core principle of working-class self-organization, was expressly intended to counter the tendency of unions under capitalism to pursue narrow, sectoral aims under the domination of a self-reproducing labor bureaucracy. The objective has always been to develop the capacity of the militant minority within the working class to overcome the limitations of the labor bureaucracy—not only to fight specific employers, but also to develop the unions as fighters for the whole class.

What we call the Rank and File Strategy was an effort to apply the lessons and methods of previous generations of socialist labor militants to the situation unfolding in US unions and in the economy in the early 1970s. It was the period when what has become known as the 'employers' offensive' was in its early stages. In response to that offensive, the labor officialdom wrung its hands and complained about the "one-sided class war" being waged by the bosses. Large numbers of workers, on the other hand, fought back with wildcat strikes, slowdowns and other direct action tactics on the job. In that context, the R&F Strategy was advanced as a way to build the capacity of rank and file union members to fight back against the boss, regardless of the actions or inactions of their union's officers.

In addition to being a strategy for building the fight on the job, it was also a strategy for building socialist consciousness and organization among the activist layer of rank and file union members. We believed that, in the course of fighting for decent contracts, for safe working conditions, against plant closings, against racist or sexist supervisors, etc., workers would become open to socialist ideas and, possibly, join a (our) socialist organization. Forty years on, I think it's safe to say that those who attempted to put the strategy into practice contributed a great deal to the ability of our co-workers to fight back -- even if many of those fights were unsuccessful. On the other hand, very few of the thousands of active union members we worked with became socialists and fewer joined a socialist organization. At some point, we should discuss why that was and if any of the reasons why they didn't join were within our ability to address or alter.

Where the R&F Strategy of 30 and 40 years ago argued that, through the struggle for democracy in the union and militant resistance to demands for cuts from the boss, workers would become open to socialist politics and organization, the R&F strategy argued for in 2014 argues that, "Building multi-issue, class-wide coalitions and movements can serve as a necessary bridge between movement-building and socialism." Maybe. However, the sooner we can have that discussion about why rank and file activists didn't become socialists, and what we might do differently to help translate an openness to socialist ideas to an embrace of them, the better.

6. Example of CTU

I think the development of CORE, its winning control of the CTU and its conduct of the strike are tremendously inspiring. That said, I think that, in the desire to present a model for other activists and unions, we need to be careful about how much we think CTU can serve as a concrete example (as opposed to an inspiration) to other public sector workers.

In my opinion, the opening for teachers and teachers' unions to form alliances with the public is different from openings other public sector workers (with the possible exception of doctors and nurses) have. This is because teachers as public employees, and education as a public service, are qualitatively different from transit, or sanitation or parks, etc.

Many, maybe most, teachers *chose* to be teachers and have a commitment to education and their students. They can be mobilized by appealing to what led them to be teachers in the first place. Not so transit workers. Few transit workers took the job because of their commitment to public transit. For parents, education is not just another public service. It's about their children's futures and the progress of their families over the next few generations. This is a much more emotionally powerful motivator than whether a bus arrives when they want or they get a seat on the subway or even if the fare goes up. In other words, there is the potential for a much stronger and broader alliance with parents and the community for teachers than there is for transit workers with riders. I think some of the

above, such as the choice to be in the profession and the emotional connection to communities in need of their service, applies to nurses, as well.

7. I don't know how significant any recommendation of a concentration will be, but, in addition to public education and healthcare, we should consider public transit. It doesn't require the additional education that teaching or nursing does. There is likely to be expansion (hiring) as cities try to address both congestion and global warming. In the public sector, the workforce tends to be predominantly people of color with a large percentage of women. Even if most transit workers do not take the job out of a commitment to public transit, the connection between their livelihood and the provision of a desirable social product can be made. The two biggest national unions, the ATU and TWU, are tilting toward alliances with the riding public, including on issues of environmental

justice (both national unions are on record opposing Keystone), and the work tends to be unionized with decent wages and benefits (but shitty working conditions).

8. The authors call for a "socialist current", "socialist organizing" a "socialist Labor left", "socialist organization in the labor movement" and "socialist perspectives" as if the meaning(s) was self-evident. I don't think it is. I think it would be useful if they offered examples of what "socialist" means in the above. Is it the same as "class-conscious"? Or "anti-capitalist"? Or "revolutionary"? If not, how does it differ? What would a *socialist* labor left do that differs from what a labor left that is not socialist might?

Steve D

NY

**Dianne F., Detroit, on the Labor Document  
December 22, 2014**

Dear Soli folks,

Thanks to Steve D. for his provocative questions of the labor document. I was particularly interested in his differentiating between certain kinds of public sector work (health care, schools) and other kinds (transit). Many city or federal workers have office jobs and I think the reality for them is similar to transit workers.

Frankly, I'm a bit worried when I read that unions need to focus on class-wide demands rather than narrower ones for their industry. It seems to me an appropriate model is the 1997 UPS strike where the main demand was to bring part-timers up to full time. The contract campaign prepared workers to tell their stories about why they needed fulltime work—and pollsters report that people supported the strikers by 2-1 margins. Clearly their stories resonated in a society where 25% of the workforce doesn't have the fulltime jobs they need. Focused on their particular demand, it was posed in a way that everyone could understand and support.

At branch exec phone calls, we talked about organizing branch discussions around the labor document and the Labor Commission has raised the idea of having commissioners at those meetings. I think that's a great idea.

In solidarity,  
Dianne

**Jane S., Detroit, on the Labor Document  
January 11, 2015**

Steve's comments are right-on. I feel embarrassed that I just skimmed over the parts of the document that were vague or not spelled out or self-contradictory. I would prefer our labor documents to be as concrete as possible. (Easy for me to say; I didn't put any work into this one.)

I do think the main idea of the document is right: that where possible, in our labor work, broadly defined, we should seek to organize for class-wide demands. Steve is right to point out that it is not always so easy or obvious how to do this, even in the public sector--much less in the private sector. Dianne raises the excellent 1997 UPS strike for full-time jobs, in which the union *did* raise a class-wide issue very successfully. The winning of their demand would benefit only UPS workers, but that's kinda the nature of most union contracts.

As I said at the convention, I found it odd that with the stress on class-wide, the document barely mentioned the formation that is one of the best approximations of that, the labor paper. To be more precise, it's a publication that stresses solidarity and class-wide unity (not in those words) and that brings people together across unions and other worker organizations both on a local level (the schools) and nationally, even internationally, at conferences. It consistently writes about such class-wide issues as health care, Social Security, climate change and writes about on-the-job issues such as fatigue and long hours in ways that people can see that conditions are similar (deteriorating) everywhere. IMO support for the paper should be a big part of our labor strategy. As I say every year. (And many comrades have long done an excellent job on this!)

## **Eric H, Western Mass, on the Labor Document**

This is my first message to the full list, so pardon my brevity. It's a bit intimidating, so I feel hesitant. I just want to say that I read the labor document a few months ago, and, as a younger member just beginning, relatively speaking, in labor work, I nonetheless had some of the same feelings expressed by the more experienced labor activist members who have written: Jane, Dianne, and Steve.

Why no mention of the labor paper? And also, why such a narrow definition of class-wide demands?

I remember when the Republic Windows and Doors plant occupation exploded into the news just following the start of the Great Recession. In one way, one could describe that struggle as a "narrow" fight to save one workplace. But wasn't it clear how that struggle really resonated with working people at that moment, given the context of growing unemployment and decades of deindustrialization? And what about Wisconsin? That was a fight for collective bargaining for public sector workers, but resonated and took on a general anti-austerity tone given the context.

I could be way off here in my reading of the labor document, and it has been some time since I read it. I am excited to see this discussion happening and look forward to reading everyone's take.