



SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM REQUIRES POLITICAL POWER



**BY THE LIBERATION ROAD
WORKERS COMMISSION**



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WHY POLITICAL POWER UNIONISM?

Our organization seeks to win a Third Reconstruction as an advance towards socialism by fighting the New Confederacy and contesting governing power at the state level through mass-based independent political organization. Liberation Road's Central Task in this three-year period is to cohere a nationwide socialist core within the "inside/outside" trend. This piece offers a vision of how the labor movement can contribute to that strategy and to our Central Task through what we call political power unionism—not itself a general line on trade union work, but a specific application of social justice unionism and leadership development unionism to the inside-outside strategy in this particular moment.

Our organization has always developed new line based on our practice in unions. We have put forward line around leadership development unionism, social justice unionism, rank and file orientation, and more, through the relationship between theory and practice. This is a concentrated path of theoretical development. This ability to act collectively, reflect collectively, and to deepen our understanding of what we face and what must be done, is the value of being in a cadre organization.

Social justice unionism has been a very powerful intervention. It has allowed socialist and progressive unionists to clearly recognize and critique

pragmatism and traditionalism in the labor movement. It has offered especially potent guidance for organizing, union democracy, community alliances and leadership development. Its power stems in part from a recognition that countering capitalist power requires a union movement that fights for the entire multinational working class, not just narrow interests of an individual union's membership. We seek to apply the theory of social justice unionism and practice of leadership development unionism in order to develop political programs that can build the power necessary to win policy and governing power for the working class.

In the last 10 years it has become increasingly clear that a movement for working class freedom must center the question of political and governing power generally and elections particularly, for at least three reasons. First, the rise of a criminal MAGA movement through the GOP has imperiled the very limited form of democracy we enjoy, a democracy that protects our right to organize. Second, elections remain the broadest form of working class political action in our society. Third, while capitalism has always been political, the entwinement of capital and the state has continued to deepen as capital becomes more desperate than ever to use political power to secure growth as it runs out of other options. Last, we have developed a clearer understanding of the dialectical relationship between building power inside and outside the electoral arena, as well as inside and outside the Democratic party. Subjective conditions have also shifted following the Bernie and DSA phenomena, and a mass of socialists now recognize the importance of the electoral arena.

First, we face an existential threat to basic liberal democracy in the United states. The MAGA movement rejects legitimate electoral outcomes and embraces the use of political violence. These are hallmarks of fascism. Unionism rests upon the basic liberal principles of freedom of association, freedom of speech, and freedom to withhold labor. Without the basic ground rules of liberal democracy, any kind of unionism, social justice or traditionalist or pragmatic, is imperiled. But more than the union movement is at stake. All working people will suffer tremendously under a fascist MAGA regime. The institutions which belong to the working class, our unions, are duty bound to lead the fight to defend democracy and defeat MAGA. This certainly includes a willingness and preparation to mobilize against anti-democratic attacks, like, for instance, street mobilizations and strikes should Trump have refused to

leave office. But these are fallback measures, and the unsexy work of electoral engagement to beat MAGA at the ballot box is just as important for our union movement.

Second, as socialist unionists, we understand ours to be a mandate to fight on behalf of the whole working class. We can do this by investing in organizing new members or by raising standards in an industry through a combination of collective bargaining and legislative fights. But the former exposes us to very few new people, and the latter mostly excludes any direct contact with non-union workers. In US political culture, elections are the window in which most working people are consciously doing politics. Taking our union vision into the electoral sphere allows us to engage with more working people than any other kind of tactics in our tool box, save perhaps extreme moments of mass mobilization. (This is not to understate the importance and transformative experience of collective bargaining when done well, which all of us understand is an essential tool for improving material conditions for workers.)

Third, the traditional enemies of the workers movement, capitalists and corporations, have become steadily intertwined and dependent upon the government since their inception, and the mutual dependence has reached never before seen levels. Capitalists are more and more using political power to secure rates of return for capital and to capture parts of the safety net that can be outsourced to private ownership. If we are to break the stranglehold capitalists have on the state and our membership's working conditions, we must contend for governing power. Here an anecdote about the Fight For 15 can be instructive.

Of course The Fight For \$15 has many origins, but one goes like this: SEIU workers in the Seattle SeaTac airport were in a contract fight pushing for wage increases. The airport was stonewalling, refusing to give an inch. SEIU threatened to put a minimum wage increase on the ballot if the airport didn't relent. By some accounts, this was a bluff. But the airport refused to budge, leaving SEIU with little choice but to play the card that they were never planning to use. They ran a municipal minimum wage hike campaign and lo and behold, they won. They won a greater increase in wages than they had been asking for at the bargaining table, and it affected far more workers. The

Fight For \$15 movement replicated the strategy across the country where Democratic municipal majorities existed in blue and sometimes purple states. Going on the offensive through not just the bargaining but also the electoral arena gave our movement more power in the fight to lift wages for the most exploited layer of the working class. Of course, the Fight for \$15 movement never achieved its twin goal of the campaign—unions for fast food workers—and has many shortcomings. We do not lift up this story as a model we should emulate but rather as a window to understand different models of engaging in the political sphere within the labor movement.

TRADITIONALISM, PRAGMATISM, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM IN POLITICAL PROGRAMS

As the labor movement has become dramatically weaker in union density, frequency and success of strikes, and overall power, so too have our political programs. At the height of its strength, the American labor movement directed a robust political program which coupled with massive strikes to wield substantial economic and political power. Through the combination of economic and political action, unions were able to substantively shape federal legislation. The Smith-Connally Act was passed in 1943 in attempts to curb this power, leading to the creation of the first PAC by the CIO.

Today, we can observe the three models of unionism that Fletcher and Gapsin describe in *Solidarity Divided* and how they play out in political work. We can understand these models through both the political agenda they fight for, and the political tactics they use to win that agenda.

Traditionalists use their unions to fight against our Multiracial Pro Democracy United Front's agenda. Unions for police, prison staff, border patrol, sections of the building trades, and some firefighters unions generally support candidates who oppose our Third Reconstruction agenda and actively fight to expand the policing apparatus that targets oppressed nationality members of our Front. They primarily use the tactics of endorsements and political donations to support their candidates.

Pragmatists use their political programs to fight for a narrow set of issues that benefit their membership but not the broader class (and sometimes those issues may be at odds with broader class goals). For example, AFSCME

DC37 in New York City has lobbied against the New York Health Act, which would create a state-level single payer health care program, in part because its "cadillac" union health plan is its biggest selling point of its value to members, and because it represents medical billing staff whose jobs would be affected by the move away from a private insurance system. Pragmatists also primarily use the tactics of endorsements and political donations to support their candidates, with some varying amount of turnout of their own membership to vote for their endorsed candidates.

Social justice unionists use their unions to fight for policy that benefits the entire working class, and they use tactics that build the leadership and power of the rank-and-file and independent political organizations to achieve those goals. For example, the Chicago Teachers Union has fought for broader working class issues at both the bargaining table and in the electoral arena. In negotiations, CTU adopted a Bargaining for the Common Good framework to advocate for an end to student homelessness, reversing school closures, and smaller class sizes after years of relationship building with families and community groups. In the electoral arena, CTU partnered with the IPO United Working Families to run Brandon Johnson (a former CTU member and later Deputy Political Director) for Mayor of Chicago. The CTU and UWF threw down both in political contributions and in organizing members to get out the vote for his campaign, defeating a New Confederacy candidate disguised as a Democrat.

At a certain level, many unions understand they must invest in building their political and governing power. The huge investment of the AFL-CIO in political work, and its underinvestment in organizing, is evidence of that. In truth, it's just a certain stripe of socialists and anarchists who lead the charge in rejecting electoral politics as a site for the workers struggle. However, most unions' political strategies suffer from some of the same philosophical shortcomings as their organizing, campaign and community strategies suffer, because they are grounded in a pragmatic or traditionalist approach.

Traditionalist and pragmatist unions tend to make political choices in small rooms rather than engaging the membership broadly. They tend to focus their support for candidates and the Democratic Party which fully demobilize after Election Day rather than long-term electoral power building. They

focus their support for candidates on financial resources, without thinking about mobilizing members. When they do mobilize their membership, it's to marshal them like disposable campaign staff, and not like an organizer mobilizes an organizing committee, with a focus on an upward spiral of consciousness and capacity for all its members. They tend not to leverage national resources for anything other than imminent national fights, leaving aside any long-term powerbuilding vision in solidly red or blue states, let alone municipalities. They do not partner and build power with IPOs in any meaningful way. They tend to make extremely risk-averse and conservative choices regarding which candidates to endorse and support; this is usually grounded in a fortress mentality seeking only to minimize loss rather than optimize gain, and a confusion between access and power.

This confusion means that most of our unions have forgotten why the Democrats have historically cared about unions' support in the first place. Yes, they need our money, but they also need our people. We represent the largest swath of the organized working class, and they need our members for their votes and for their organization to turn out the rest of their communities. As our movement has gotten weaker in our organizing skills on the shop floor, so too have they waned in the political and electoral arena, and we can all see the consequences.

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to build a strategy for working class power in government. We are still at the mercy of Democrats when we do not build independent political power. Pragmatic and conservative unionism has a failed approach to politics, and it is incumbent on socialists in the labor movement to help think through and implement a program that builds and demonstrates our people power from shop floor to voting booth.

WHAT SHOULD A POLITICAL POWER UNIONISM PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?

As socialists, we should lead our unions into electoral struggle against the New Confederacy that builds independent political power.

Our vision of political power unionism includes:

- Mobilizing our members in large numbers to engage in key races that are most likely to have a decisive impact on winning governing power for our United Front
- Practicing widespread and deep leadership development of members to run all levels of electoral field operations, from canvassers to team leads to directors, understanding that political work is also a chance to develop members' leadership
- Connecting that leadership back into the workplace fights (developing leaders to be organizers, salts, and other union leaders)
- Focusing on person-to-person conversations, through door knocking and phone banking
- Integrating comprehensive political education into all aspects of political and union work
- Building municipal- and state-level IPOs, either by creating them or partnering with them on field operations and between elections
- Supporting candidates that advance a full Third Reconstruction agenda (not just a narrow set of issues that appeal to your membership), especially those who run against New Confederacy candidates

There is no perfect political program in the social justice unionism model to date, but there are strong examples that we seek to learn from and build upon.

UNITE-HERE's national political program is a strong model to study. The program has been written about in *Power Concedes Nothing* and in several articles. After 98% of its members lost their jobs at the beginning of the pandemic, the union pivoted its work to the political arena. (If the ability for your members to return to work depends on the government solving a public health crisis, then your workplace fight becomes a political one

overnight.) It conducted an independent analysis of the political landscape and identified which races would have the most impact in defeating Trump and therefore were most strategic for the union to invest resources in—both financially and with a robust field program of members paid by the union to do full-time canvassing. The program worked: an astounding 1,700 UNITE-HERE canvassers knocked on the doors of 3 million voters in Nevada, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Florida for months in the fall of 2020. Its program and members were instrumental to turning Georgia blue with an upset win in the January 2021 and November 2022 Georgia Senate runoffs. UNITE-HERE built a national political program that hits on nearly all of the principles listed above: members' leadership was developed throughout the program, with deep political education and specific pipelines to move canvassers into higher levels of leadership in the program. Canvassers conducted deeper organizing conversations on the doors, not just quick GOTV hits, all while the Democratic Party had largely eschewed door knocking during the pandemic.

There are specific elements of the U-H program that have enabled it to reach such a large scale that may be harder to replicate in other unions in the near term. For example, members participating in the program come into the field on lost time for several months at a time in some cases, and there is a significant fundraising program to expand the work. There is buy-in from the national level and across locals that makes it possible to continue to develop and advance this program. But it is worth noting that all of this work happened while the union was put in its most vulnerable position in workplace fights—with little structural power for fighting back—and its response was not to retreat but to go on the offensive politically. We believe this is a strong model to learn from and strive to emulate wherever and however possible.

Now, the goal is to collectively and concertedly build, deepen, and expand a political power unionism program across our unions to carry out more of these principles and in more places.

SPREADING THE TREND

We, the Workers Commission, are calling on the labor movement to adopt political power unionism in our 2024 electoral work and beyond.

To be clear, there is no one-size-fits-all way of instituting this program, and we will all have different openings and capacity to move it. It will not be possible to institute the full depth and breadth of this program in each of our unions overnight. But we believe this model is the north star that we should all study and work to implement concertedly over time.

The national level of your union may be impossible to penetrate with this strategy in this moment. You may be in a role that does not interface with your union's political program or have no say over its direction. The first step in moving any program is a concrete analysis of your concrete conditions, and an assessment of where you have openings. This could mean that you organize your fellow rank-and-filers to join a canvass that aligns with this program to see the model up close and urge your union to adopt it. It could mean figuring out how your local can access the political action funds it contributes to and building out a mini-pilot of this work in your local. It could mean changing your role to a political department in your union to build this program from the ground up. It could mean bargaining for more lost time language in your next contract so that your local can bring more members into electoral work in the future. It could mean building a political education program that brings members into political power unionism over time. It could mean getting buy-in from your leadership to recruit members to deploy to a political power unionism field operation locally.

We don't know how you will carry this out, but—alongside your comrades—we call on you to try.



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