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ACTIVIST

Winter 2025





Contents

<i>Letter from the Editors</i>	3
<i>Dispatch from the Co-Chairs</i>	4
<i>There's Power in the Union: Democracy and Divestment at SFSU</i>	6
<i>Organize the Ed School!: Building a Rank-and-File Pipeline at Brown</i>	11
<i>May 2028 Starts Now: Local Labor and Long-Term Strategy</i>	14
<i>Towards a Nationwide Student Union</i>	19

The Activist
Winter 2025

Editorial Board

Executive Editors *Rafi Ash*
Amina Mednicoff-Misra

Editors *Nelson Calles*
Daniel Salup-Cid

Front cover by Coline McEachern

The Activist is a publication by and for volunteer organizers in the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA), edited by members of the editorial board, and featuring the writing of YDSA members from chapters across the country.

The original *Activist* ran its last issue in Fall 2017. The 2019 YDSA Summer Convention revived the publication, based on the idea that "there exists within YDSA an acute need for a unifying, engaging, and thoughtful publication of the socialist youth perspective, particularly from the most marginalized in the United States; for political dialogue and theoretical development within YDSA on topics including organizational culture, tactics, and strategy, which is guided by the real experiences of organizers on the ground; and for a means to develop a shared community and camaraderie by promoting and institutionalizing respectful and rigorous political debate as an integral function of YDSA."

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We would love to feature your work. Please send pitches and submissions to theactivistydsa@gmail.com. Also, consider joining the editorial board! The Editorial Board specifically encourages non-men and people of color to write and apply.



Letter from the Editors

February 2025



Comrades,

We are in the first months of the second Trump administration. Over the past year, we have witnessed the horrors of genocide in Gaza and an expanding war across the Middle East; climate change fueled disasters have hit across the country—from Hurricane Helene in inland North Carolina to fires burning across southern California—impacting the most disenfranchised populations hardest; and the US government has doubled down on attacks against immigrants, our family, friends, and neighbors. Our world feels fragile. Facing the global rise of the far right and crackdowns on freedom of expression from our university administrations to our government, we cannot feel hopeless.

Now more than ever, socialists must lead the fight against fascism and commit to long-term strategies of building power. The Democratic Party has once again failed to defeat Donald Trump by binding itself to unpopular policies on behalf of the capitalist class, mimicking Republican talking points on Gaza, the border, and fossil fuel extraction. The only path forward is mass action in the streets, on our campuses, and in our workplaces.

This issue highlights the SFSU Student Union's successful divestment campaign and the democratic infrastructure that made it possible; explores the national expansion and unification of YDSA's student union project; and lays out long-term labor strategies for the socialist movement, including building rank-and-file pipelines into the education labor movements and preparation for the proposed May Day 2028 general strike. As we recommit ourselves to lifetimes of socialist organizing, we have never been prouder to organize in YDSA alongside you all. We have nothing to lose but our chains

In solidarity,

Rafi Ash and Amina Mednicoff Misra
Executive Editors

Dispatch from the Co-Chairs

YDSA National Co-Chairs Carlos and Aron discuss the first half of their term and where we go from here.

Thank you for picking up this edition of The Activist! We are extremely proud that YDSA has a publication that is by and for members of our incredible organization. As co-chairs we are incredibly proud of the work our chapters have engaged in over the past year whether it is organizing workplaces, setting up democratic student unions, or making campuses a sanctuary for those vulnerable under right-wing control. Thanks to our paid national political leadership, we have been able to regularly meet with chapters both in-person and virtually along with running our many important committees like the Youth Labor Committee (YLC), Youth Growth and Development Committee (YGDC), Palestine Committee, Chapter Health and Intersectionality Committee (CHIC), and many more. The National Coordinating Committee's capacity has been

increased incredibly and allowed us the opportunity to bring national YDSA to local chapters.

We began this term under very turbulent circumstances, starting with Joe Biden's public and historic drop out during the 2024 YDSA National Convention. We both knew we had to not just organize a response to the 2024 election but keep in mind the very different organizing realities that could unfold before us. Many lessons were learned from the encampment movement earlier in the year about the importance of movement democracy, engaging in mass action, and the principled role YDSA has as socialist organizers in broader struggles. It is also apparent that YDSA was going through a period of transition



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The 2024-2025 National Coordinating Committee, from left to right: National Co-Chair Carlos Callejo III, Steven Raney, Callyn Johnson, Daniel Salup-Cid, David Lefevre, Sean Bridge, Jeffrey Childs, Uma Clemenceau, National Co-Chair Aron Ali-McClory

as the Bernie 2020 generation was now graduating out of the organization. We also recognize that 2028 will be a major year with UAW's unprecedented call for national coordinated union activity and the 2028 election. With these elements in mind, this NCC has taken up the responsibility as transitional stewards of this historic organization we all belong to.

This NCC found that in order to meet the moment and be ready to engage in a meaningful way in future struggles, we would have to build the foundation now. This is why we have been committed to coordinating more regional networks across university systems and geography, supporting existing chapters with their on-the ground organizing, and building new chapters in previously unorganized geographic areas. We are proud of the growing YDSA presence in places like Texas, Kentucky, and the Pacific Northwest. We also recognize the ambitious nature of some of this

work like building democratic bottom-up student unions, organizing workplaces, and fighting against the ever-growing privatization of our universities.

Although this year has had its fair share of unpredictability, we are committed to supporting chapters to build towards and test student strikes as a viable tactic to engage in. Just as with building student unions, this is a long term project that patiently requires deep departmental organizing, measurable structure tests, and strong organizer recruitment and development. Some campuses show the potential of striking sooner than later but it is imperative that the student strike organizing process is not rushed and is connected with campus conditions.

Following our mandate at convention, we continue to push ahead and build a stronger YDSA that the next generation can inherit. As your national co-chairs and long term YDSA leaders, we are proud of how far this organization

has come in such a short time. Whether it is starting your own chapter on a new campus or joining an existing one, we are proud to know that our organization is standing tall and ready to meet whatever challenge we meet next. We have a lot of work ahead, but we know we can do it together.

With revolutionary love & en solidaridad,

Aron Ali-McClory & Carlos Callejo III
2024-2025 YDSA National Co-Chairs

There's Power in the Union

After a 16-day encampment last spring, the San Francisco State University Student Union won full divestment from weapon manufacturers. Ali Noorzad argues that their power was rooted in the union's democracy and transparency.

By Ali Noorzad

In Fall 2024, San Francisco State University became the first university in the United States to entirely divest from weapons manufacturing companies. The university did so on the back of a 16-day long encampment that forced our university leaders to make concessions. But, understanding the win through those 16 days alone reflects only a surface-level analysis.

Months before the encampment started, SFSU was in turmoil. California State University leaders had voted to raise our tuition by 35% over five years. Hundreds of faculty had been cut in the spring semester due to budget cuts. The anger these cuts had provoked sparked an incredible wave of student organizing in the fall of 2023. I watched as several hundred students marched throughout campus demanding a reversal of the tuition hikes. Our faculty went on a system-wide strike, grinding university operations to a halt for parts of December and January.

Through these experiences, SFSU organizers came to understand the issue at the heart of these struggles. At SFSU, there's a sense of isolation that pervades every classroom. It's a working-class school where most students are burdened

by long commute times and working one or two jobs on top of full-time classes. Most commuters are eager to leave as soon as they enter campus, leading to a lot of students who seem too tired (or too anxious) to build relationships beyond their studies. In the classroom, you can almost feel a vow of silence among the majority of students. There is little sense that one student belongs to a larger student body.

The consequences of this isolation culture are huge for our organizing. In one class I presented to in the fall, I asked the question, "What would it take to reverse the tuition hikes?" A student raised their hand to suggest a student strike. Many of their classmates expressed agreement. Next, I asked, "If a student organization called a strike tomorrow, but you didn't know if your classmates would strike with you: would you strike?" Only one student raised their hand, and it wasn't the one who suggested the idea.

Students are upset about countless issues. But, they feel powerless to stop them. They feel powerless because they don't have confidence that if they fight,

their classmates will fight with them. At SFSU, we as socialist organizers had to build an organization whose sole purpose was to break through that false sense of powerlessness. We envisioned a scenario where one student could look at a crowd of other students holding their hands up for a strike, and know that they weren't alone. YDSA was great, but it was limited to socialists. We needed an organization that could represent the entire student body. So, to address this issue, we started building the Student Union.

Our vision of the Student Union was somewhat general at first. We knew we wanted an organization that, 1) attracted membership from all over the university, 2) fought around the issues that impacted the widest breadth of students, 3) was steered by rank-and-file students, and 4) was dedicated solely to building the power of the student body.

Early on, we made a conscious decision that we would build something different than the coalition model (meaning a coalition of organization leaders that get together to coordinate

a movement). The main challenges that come with the coalition model are twofold. One, more time is spent wrangling activist leaders than on organizing the students we need to organize. When you're stuck in several meetings a week trying to corral other activists, there's little energy left to go out and organize your classmates. This makes organizers feel as if our power lies in our relationships with other activist leaders. But in reality, our power lies in the hands of the student body - and whether or not we can move them to fight together. Two, control of the movement is taken out of the hands of ordinary students. These coalitions inevitably come with the expectation that decisions are made behind closed doors by activist leaders, rather than out in the open. At SFSU, we wanted more students to take ownership of the movement against the tuition hikes. So, we abandoned the coalition model. Instead, we sought out to build a mass organization that could represent any and all students. As later events showed, this decision was crucial to our divestment win.

By the time of the encampment movement, we had been building our Student Union for about six months. The Union had accrued about 40 active members and 500 paper members from across the school. Our work consisted of three organizing priorities: One, winning the trust of people in our classes; two, agitating them around campus issues; three, training new organizers that could do the same.

A lot of the initial classroom-level organizing was constant trial-and-error. I lost count of the students I did 1-on-1s with once just to never hear from again. But, when we failed, we failed in ways that allowed us to learn. Throughout these months, we developed a small group of organizers that were steadily learning how to do this kind of organizing. These same organizers would later make the interventions that allowed the encampment to succeed.

Our first organizing took place around non-Palestine issues, yet it ended up serving as crucial to the encampment moment. Following the

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Over 500 students in the SFSU Student Union walk out of class in November 2023 to protest a tuition hike.





events at Columbia, the Student Union called for a general assembly of the student body to vote on whether to hold an encampment on our campus. Initially, there was deep hesitation from other student organizations. Most activist leaders approached the idea of an encampment with sentiments ranging from unease to outright hostility. Our response to this was to invite everyone, opposed and supportive, to come to the general assembly and express their opinion.

The general assembly proved pivotal. About 170 students showed up to take part in the debate. Most of these students had been turned out by Student Union organizers in one way or another. Some leaders really let us have it with their opposition to the encampment proposal. Nevertheless, in the end, the encampment vote passed with about a two-thirds majority. For

months, we had been building up the muscle of the student body for one fight around the tuition hikes. What we realized was that the strength we had built up in one struggle was not restricted to that one struggle. That same muscle was ready to take on the fight for justice in Palestine when the moment came.

Once our encampment began, we were uncompromising on our principles of democracy and mass organizing. After the assembly vote, a few leaders expressed reservations on the possibility of setting up a democratic encampment. Instead, they suggested an appointed leadership of the “most advanced” activist leaders to better serve the encampment. However, given that the majority of the relationships with prospective campers had been developed by Student Union organizers, we were able to set up the encampment in the democratic model of the union. On the third day of the encampment, a leadership body was democratically elected by a general assembly. Four of the nine leaders, including me, were leaders from the Student Union. On the fourth day of the encampment, campers voted 70-1 to mandate open bargaining with the president of our university, Lynn Mahoney. By the seventh day, SFSU became the first encampment in the country to openly negotiate with a university president in the middle of campus in front of 400 students, faculty, and community members.

“SFSU became the first encampment in the country to openly negotiate with a university president in the middle of campus in front of 400 students, faculty, and community members.”

Following the first bargaining session, President Mahoney deferred the responsibility of changing investment policy to others. She placed responsibility on the Investment Committee, the SFSU Foundation, and Jeff from Cambridge (an unknown man that she referenced at least ten times during the first bargaining session). Deflections were expected. So, as encampment leaders, we printed

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An open bargaining session with President Lynn Mahoney at the SFSU encampment in May 2024.

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Students post the encampment's demands on a tent on the campus quad.



out her email response, recited it word-by-word to the encampment, and posted it to social media.

Later, the encampment voted on escalatory tactics at a general assembly: picketing the administration's parking garage and holding a march and die-in around the administration building. The march rapidly grew to almost 1,000 students. Following this march, we received another email response from Mahoney. SFSU was willing to commit to divesting from weapons manufacturing companies by the Fall 2025 semester, among other concessions. After weeks of camping (and months of organization-building), the encampment finally had won material change from the administration. We brought the deal back to our general assembly, which approved the agreement and voted to decamp.

After the agreement, we held a rally to celebrate our wins. I marched alongside hundreds of students whose first real political experience was in this struggle. I remember vividly a conversation with one student in particular. I hadn't seen him before, and I struck up a conversation with him while we moved with the larger crowd. I asked him why he came to the rally, and he answered that this was actually his

first. He hadn't come to any of the prior protests. He didn't feel they would make much of a difference. I asked him, "What changed?" He responded that he saw that we actually won something.

As that student enters the rest of his life, like hundreds of others at SFSU, he will take the experience of this movement with him. He will carry the understanding that you can actually get shit done by fighting together. He will not go into the workplace with the bitter self-defeating cynicism that dominates so many others. Our task as socialists must be to replicate his experience all around the world.

Ali Noorzad is a former cochair of SFSU YDSA and elected leader of the SFSU encampment. He is a senior studying history.

Organize the Ed School!

Last year, Brown YDSA launched a rank-and-file organizing workshop for current and future teachers. By focusing YDSA organizing on educators, the chapter puts the Rank-and-File Strategy into concrete practice.

By Gina L. and Rafi Ash

Brown University YDSA's workshop series, Rank-and-File Organizing for Teachers, is a new model of education and empowerment for teacher training that puts the rank-and-file strategy into action. Our program brings together student activists, Master of the Arts in Teaching (MAT) students, and current teachers from Massachusetts' Educators for a Democratic Union (EDU) and Providence's Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE). The EDU has led the Massachusetts Teachers Association for a decade while CORE launched recently. The series emphasizes militancy, democracy, and the power of the labor movement in education, aiming to transform consciousness and fight for the common good.

The past year at Brown demonstrated both strengths and weaknesses of high-intensity and media-covered action on campus. Rank-and-File Organizing for Teachers builds from a long-term organizing strategy for concrete power. The rank-and-file strategy mobilizes socialist organizers to join the labor movement in strategic sectors, such as education, healthcare, and logistics.

These sectors already have relatively high union density and infrastructure and are uniquely situated within our communities and the economy to be able to powerfully intervene with effective strikes that can win broad working-class victories.

Kim Moody writes that socialists engaged directly on the "shop floor" hold the key for effective, radical unions and building a socialist society. As YDSA members, we can advance the labor movement through political education that connects young people's existing career aspirations to organizing communities and socialist theory and practice.

At each convention since 2022, YDSA Convention has passed resolutions orienting our labor program to rank-and-file organizing, but chapters have struggled to directly implement this work. Additionally, socialist organizing at elite universities such as Brown can be frustrating because of the capitalist-class background or aspirations of some students. However, Brown's education program, which offers a one-year MAT for students who have completed their BA's or BS's, is an excellent site for YDSA

organizing. Our rank-and-file education organizing series recruits and activates lifelong labor organizers. We bring campus socialists and left activists into strategic industries, and we develop socialist consciousness among people already working in or training for those sectors.

We have a roadmap for other chapters to replicate and build on this work. (Email us at brown.risd.dsa@gmail.com!) Our workshop invites speakers who share their successes and challenges as teacher organizers, provide space for educators to reflect on the conditions in the schools where they are completing residencies or practicums, and dissect case studies that highlight teachers' organizing wins. Student teachers' direct experience of pervasive underfunding, systemic racism, and stagnancy in their residency schools illuminates the need for change but can feel demoralizing. Learning how teachers in Chicago, Los Angeles, West Virginia, and Massachusetts, have taken to the streets to win demands with and for their students and communities provides hope and a concrete path forward.

Our largest event of the semester

brought Barbara Madeloni, a reform caucus leader whose insurgent election as president transformed the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) in 2014, to campus. We approached a sympathetic professor in the education

the face of anti-teacher and anti-student policies. Madeloni operated from the knowledge that politicians listen when workers are organized, not polite. She began her presidency with meetings across the state to engage rank-and-

with 62% of the vote. It is clear that teachers are uniquely positioned to form broad coalitions with popular demands to win elections. However, their power is in the workplace, first and foremost. In fall 2024, three MTA locals launched wildcat strikes. Parents and students joined them on the picket lines, but they ultimately won bargaining concessions because of their labor power.

Madeloni's hopeful messages reached and resonated with a new audience, including Anna R., a student in Brown's teacher training program who had not been involved with YDSA prior to the talk. She shared, "I feel this sense of trust towards her [Madeloni] and, and here she is at this YDSA organized workshop talk and identifying with this group [...] that's kind of what I feel like draws me into spaces where I might not individually find myself."

Our workshop series is only the beginning of a broader strategy and pipeline that our chapter will develop over the coming year. Our current workshops are limited by what we call "pre-organizing." For the most part, we are training student teachers who will receive certification and enter the workplace within one to three years, and student teachers are excluded from union bargaining. More organizing may be needed to bridge the gap between training and the full workplace experience. However, Moz M. shared that the workshop was "something that I wouldn't have even thought to seek out," but that hearing "on-the-ground specifics of what organizing in unions look like [...] before going into a union space" has been "crazy, crazy valuable."

First on our priority list is encouraging rank-and-file graduates who stay in Providence to continue as workshop participants and leaders. Our workshop could take simultaneous roles as a

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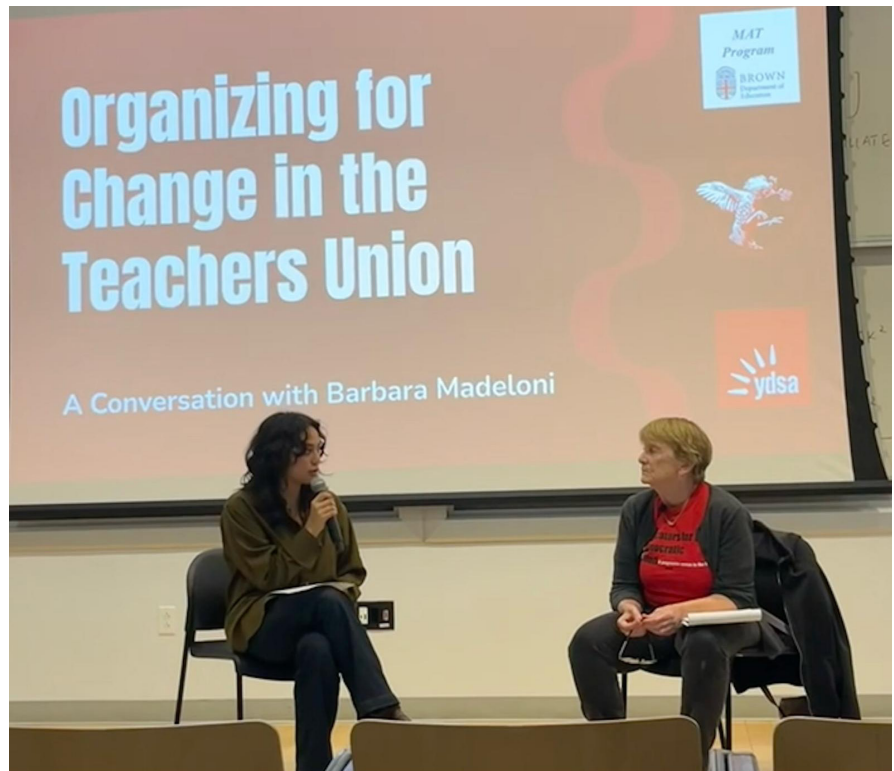
department who dedicated a full MAT class session to the visit. Organizers from across the Providence Public School District, members of undergraduate and staff campus labor organizations, and educators in Rhode Island DSA joined the session with over 100 total participants. Moz M., a workshop participant and Brown undergraduate who hopes to teach in New York City, shared, "hearing [Madeloni's] practical experience of what that has looked like for her in being a part of the union and then rising up to be the president of the union [...] was crazy," and "I'd definitely say that is a highlight of this experience."

Madeloni emphasized rank-and-file power, participatory democracy, and, above all, setting ambitious goals. Before the EDU surge under her leadership, the MTA, from the Administration to many front-line teachers, had a limited vision of what they could change about their working conditions. Previous MTA presidents prized their access to "The Governor," won at the cost of silence in

file educators. In these meetings, she posed three key questions: "What gives you joy in the classroom? What sucks the joy out of the classroom? And what's one thing we could start to change that would bring the joy back?" Madeloni recounted a "heartbreaking moment" during one of these sessions when a teacher, responding to the final question, said, "Can we get some of those colored sticky notes that you're using?" Madeloni reflected, "That's how narrow their sense of what was possible had become."

Within two years, the MTA made historic victories in anti-privatization and teacher protections. Madeloni led teachers in a statewide effort to fight a corporate-led and funded ballot referendum to expand charter schools and gut public-school financing. The victory of "No on 2" owed largely to immense rank-and-file teacher involvement—phone banking, canvassing, and simply speaking to members of their community. When ordinary teachers made their voices heard, ordinary voters trusted them: they struck down the referendum

Gina in conversation with Former Massachusetts Teachers Association President Barbara Madeloni at an event hosted by Brown YDSA this fall.



workers' circle-style organizing cohort for active rank-and-file teachers who bring in new generations of educators. We hope to expand relationships with current teachers in Providence CORE and Rhode Island DSA to integrate the workshops with solidarity work for current campaigns. We hope to integrate with the work of the Rank and File Project and local and national Y/DSA labor committees. Finally, we seek to support undergraduate, graduate, and staff unions on campus. This would bring undergraduate union leaders into rank-and-file labor organizing, turning teaching students and our workshop out for labor support, training, and actions led by unions on campus, and connecting organizing skills in active labor campaigns to long-term perspectives and strategies in the education labor movement.

YDSA must orient towards building lifelong socialist organizers within the

rank-and-file of the labor movement. Because it integrates socialist ideals with concrete workplace practice, we see Rank and File as the strategy most likely to build lifelong and effective socialist commitment. Nursing and education—underpaid, overworked, and dedicated to the common good—are especially high priority. Organizing these sectors should begin on all of our campuses. YDSA can make socialist school-and-work connections between the colleges and universities already training many idealistic young people and nearby unionized employment. By concentrating YDSA organizing within strategic departments, we can build a denser base rooted in long-term strategy that can bolster democracy and power in labor unions toward mass action.

Gina L. is a member of Brown YDSA and a Masters of Arts in Teaching student.

Rafi Ash is a member of Brown YDSA and a junior studying urban studies and mathematics.

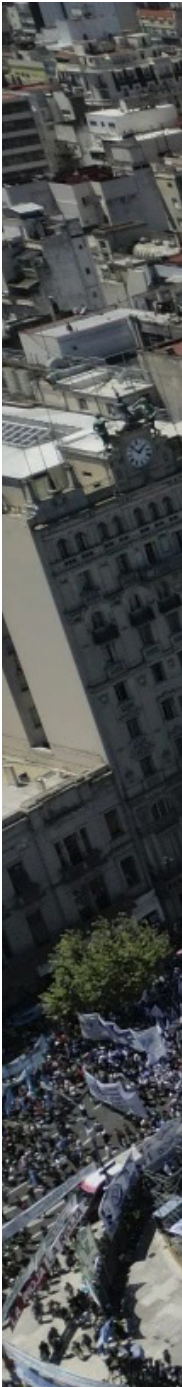
May Day 2028 Starts Now

NCC member David Lefevre urges YDSA to start organizing towards the May 2028 general strike led by some of the largest unions in the country. This work begins with measured goals and the expansion of YDSA alongside mass organizations.

By David Lefevre

As the rich race to become trillionaires, working people are deprived of healthcare, affordable housing, and free education. Capitalism not only makes the present miserable, but threatens the future of human life on earth with the risk of ecological collapse and nuclear winter. There is an immense gap between this status quo and our vision of an egalitarian world. It's our duty to bridge this gap. While we hammer away on campaigns locally, it is often unclear how each of our isolated campaigns bring us closer to socialism. To seriously organize towards socialism we must connect our local campaigns to long, medium, and short term goals. Using this method, we can effectively organize towards a 2028 general strike that fundamentally alters the American political landscape.

YDSA is well positioned to lead a serious socialist movement in the United States given our ability to make tangible wins through struggle and our democratic national structure. YDSA chapters across the country have already fought and won campaigns to help unionize student workers, make Plan B affordable, create a sanctuary city for trans people, and elect cadre candidates to city council. Organizers of successful local campaigns mature our whole national organization by influencing national priorities





A general strike in Argentina in January 2024 protesting anti-labor decrees and austerity measures proposed by President Javier Milei.



made during the annual convention and share their experiential knowledge through national committees and in-person events.

Our national organization is also strengthened through the dialectics of having a big ideological tent. Rather than dissipating into sectarian groups, opposing factions transform each other and sharpen the politics of our whole organization by addressing internal contradictions. Grassroots organizing as well as local and national democracy allow our organization to synthesize solutions to internal contradictions and thus be well positioned to advance the socialist movement in the United States.

Connecting local campaigns and national strategy into a longer-term vision remains a challenge that must be overcome to seriously build towards socialism. This challenge is especially pertinent for YDSA, as high leadership and membership turnover can result in rapid fluctuation in national priorities. However, our national structure helps retain institutional memory around internal contradictions, as seen by previously contentious resolutions becoming hegemonic with supermajority convention approval.

New strategic questions should be raised within hegemonic resolutions, especially for some of our most important organizing tasks, to sharpen our national priorities. Resolutions can be improved by including ambitious multi-year SMART (specific, measurable, accurate, relevant, and time-specific) goals with annual milestones.

Some resolutions from the 2024 YDSA convention, such as the ones concerning labor (R3) and student unions (R21), have already moved in the right direction by setting multi-year timeframes. Resolutions with clear

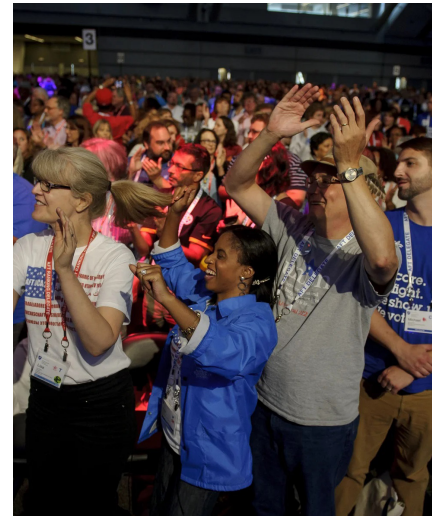
goals increase NCC and national committee accountability to our membership by creating clear metrics to track progress. Reflection on national priorities during annual conventions will allow for necessary adjustment to multi-year goals and prevent dogmatism. National priorities with ambitious multi-year SMART goals and annual milestones provide direction and support for chapters in long-term campaigns.

The two primary goals of DSA are to build a militant and organized working-class movement and to create an independent working-class political party. We should organize towards a 2028 general strike with the aim of building working-class political power in the 2028 presidential election year.

The goal for a 2028 general strike is qualitatively different from other disorganized, unserious calls for general strikes, since President of the United Auto Workers (UAW) Shawn Fain backed it. The UAW is well positioned to lead this charge as a multinational union representing several hundred thousand workers, which has recently organized multiple impressive strikes as well as new drives.

Furthermore, the American Federation of Teachers, which represents 1.8 million workers, as well as other union locals passed resolutions in 2024 to join the UAW's efforts to build towards a 2028 general strike. The feasibility of these efforts are aided by increased working-class militancy, 26 million participants in the Black Lives Matter movement, and 3,645 arrests of students protesting for Palestine. This increased militancy must translate into a real, resurgent working-class movement which can reverse the half-century trend of declining union density.

An independent working-class party





United Auto Workers (UAW) President Sean Fain has called on other union leaders to align their contracts for May 1, 2028: "We want a general strike. We want everybody walking out just like they do in other countries."



The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) 2024 convention voted to join the UAW's calls for aligning contract expirations for May 2028.



capable of supplanting the Democratic Party can only be achieved through renascent organized labor and social movements. Merging the economic and political struggle remains a central challenge of the socialist movement. In *What is to Be Done*, Lenin warns socialists of the danger of economism, as economic movements without aims for political power cede crucial terrain for class struggle, especially the ability to end imperialist wars which harm the working class at home and abroad. Political power is necessary for the working class to defend against the ascendent fascist attacks on undocumented immigrants, trans people, and people of color.

Many DSA electoralists conversely attempt to build a political movement without aims for economic power and thus cede the primary terrain for class struggle: the shop floor. Electoralists fail to build mass organizations around economic struggle which can additionally serve as a political base. The lack of an organized working-class political base can be seen by the swift defeats of Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman against a well-funded AIPAC opposition campaign.

Both Jane McAlevey and William Z. Foster remind us that building an organized base of power in the community is a long process that can unify various social and economic groups. Only after many years of organizing did the mass mobilization of labor unions and sociocultural and religious institutions win major concessions in the United States, including New Deal social programs and civil rights protections. Y/DSA chapters must launch long-term campaigns of building strong mass organizations as a prerequisite for the formation of an independent working-class party.

To make these two intertwined goals SMART, YDSA must develop a long-term plan with milestones to ensure that these mass organizations are built. Ideally universities across the country would have a trifecta of student, student-worker, and tenants unions to leverage our economic power around tuition, labor, and rent respectively.

By coordinating strikes which could immobilize higher educational institutions with hundreds of billions in total annual operating budgets, this trifecta of unions could win major demands. There are a multitude of important spillover effects from student-worker unions: material wins for student workers, moving established unions they are affiliated with left, shifting consciousness of ordinary students who see their peers organize, training union organizers who are entering the workforce, and developing YDSA cadre. Furthermore, these mass organizations will radicalize a base of youth through struggle and be the proto formation for an independent working-class party.

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Members of University of Oregon Student Workers
*United Auto Workers (UOSW-UAW) attend a rally
for a fair contract in October 2024 in the midst of
negotiations.*



No current organization other than YDSA has the infrastructure, organizational skills, discipline, and courage to begin building these mass organizations required to achieve our two principal tasks. But YDSA chapters must help build and exist alongside mass organizations, not dissolve into them. By being separate but deeply enmeshed in these mass organizations, YDSA chapters can serve as a vanguard element that advances the interests of working and oppressed people via class struggle.

YDSA chapters are not inherently a vanguard element and only become so through sacrifice and discipline of cadre organizers. Che Guevara reminds us that “the cadres, as political leaders, should gain the respect of the workers by their actions.” Being a vanguard is not a title that can be thrown around, but a relationship that is built through struggle. I have experienced this through my organizing at the University of Oregon, where our YDSA chapter founded the University of Oregon Student Workers United Auto Workers union (UOSW-UAW) and our organizations continue to have a symbiotic relationship with each other. In the early stages of UOSW-UAW’s creation, ideological commitment was a driving force of core organizers, which highlights the importance of YDSA chapters in the multi-year process of developing a mass organization.

Increasing YDSA chapter density and creating mass organizations is necessary to pull off a successful 2028 general strike that makes wins for working people and builds political power via an independent, working-class party.

I have set three milestones to work towards this ambitious long term goal. The first is to increase Pacific Northwest YDSA

chapters density to four out of seven public universities in Oregon, two out of six in Washington, and two out of three public universities in Idaho. The second is for the Youth Labor Committee’s student worker mentorship to have three successful union drives and build ten new organizing committees (Reach out to the YLC for mentorship!) The third is to have an effective census of graduating YDSA members to track and improve our execution of the Rank-and-File Strategy, as well as funnel at least 150 graduates into DSA chapters.

Using these concrete milestones and strategies, we are well armed in the fight for socialism in our lifetime. We must be bold and dare struggle if we wish to realize our radical vision for a more just world.

David Lefevre *is a former chair of University of Oregon YDSA, a founding rank-and-file leader of University of Oregon Student Workers Union, and a member the National Coordinating Committee.*

Towards a Nationwide Student Union

To carry out student strikes, we'll need militant and democratic student unions. But we can't stop at one campus—it's time to start thinking about a nationwide student organization.

By David Purucker

Today, the landscape of left student politics is defined by three forces—young socialists, the student labor movement, and the movement in solidarity with Palestine.

Student workers have organized to build power in the workplace. Solidarity activists have pushed the burning question of Palestine onto the political agenda. Student socialists have worked to build both movements and draw connections to the struggle against capitalism.

But despite our real successes over the last few years, the majority of students on our campuses remain on the sidelines. And the crises of austerity, fascism, and climate breakdown only grow more threatening.

To break the impasse, young socialists need to find a way to mobilize masses of ordinary students. At universities like San Francisco State, City University of New York, and Virginia Tech, YDSA members are experimenting with a new kind of organization: a membership-based student union.

Militant and democratic student unions like those in Canada and Brazil organize students across academic departments and use the threat of strikes to bring administrators to the bargaining table.

Last summer, YDSA convention delegates passed a resolution committing our organization to identify and support five campuses with the potential to establish student unions over the next three years.

Student unions are still in their infancy, and building them up will take time. But given the urgency of fighting back against an ascendant Right that wants to smash Palestine solidarity and gut public universities, socialists need to start thinking about the bigger picture.

How can we link isolated student struggles together into a nationwide movement stronger than the sum of its parts? And how can we make student power a real and durable factor in state and national politics?

Campus student unions are a necessary starting point. But to realize their full potential, student unions need to be constructed with something much larger in mind: a nationwide, membership-based student association.

Three developments in the student movement

Since the pandemic and over the course of the Biden administration, three major developments occurred in the student movement. The first was the growth of YDSA and other student socialist groups, even in a period where DSA and progressive-left organizations struggled to grow.

The second was the emergence of undergraduate student-worker unions, a type of organization with almost no precedent in the United States or abroad. Today, there are at least 34 different majority-undergraduate worker unions around the country, representing over 32,000 student workers.

The third development was the dramatic emergence of the Palestine solidarity movement on campuses around the country since October 2023. YDSA chapters have played an important role in both student labor and Palestine solidarity organizing.

Taken together, these three currents—socialism, undergraduate worker unions, and Palestine activism—are a major step forward for the student movement.

But this picture is missing something. We know that not all students are ready to join YDSA chapters. And while young people are broadly horrified by the Gaza genocide, the number of students willing to take action and join Palestine-focused issue organizations like Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) is still small.

Undergraduate student-worker unions are different. Labor unions engage working people at an immediate level, meeting them where they're at by fighting for improvements to their working conditions. But student labor unions have an obvious limitation: they only organize the limited number of students who have jobs on campus.

Many working-class students aren't employed by their universities, and either work off-campus or take out student loans. Even students who do have campus jobs still have basic needs that can't be addressed easily through labor-based collective bargaining—issues like affordable housing and funding for academic programs.

If we want to transform our universities to win our biggest demands, we'll need to mobilize huge numbers of students. That will require another kind of organization—one that takes advantage of the latent power held by all students on our campuses.

Student unions: the missing piece

Labor unions are at the heart of the socialist strategy for building working-class power because they are structure-based organizations. Unions bring very different people together by virtue of their common position in a social structure—a workplace.

How can we get students to fight for their common interests when they're not all employed in campus jobs? The key is to understand the university itself as a kind of social structure analogous to a workplace.

Students have particular collective interests and experiences just by virtue of being students. These interests are powerfully shaped by a common institution, the university, and the administrators who control it.

Administrators depend on the daily labor of students to keep the university running. This is obviously true of student workers in dining halls or dorms. But it is also true of students' academic lives — going to classes, submitting papers, and taking exams.

The reproduction of the life of any college campus is premised on this daily activity, which is a kind of labor. And like all labor, it can be withdrawn.

These structural conditions make possible a kind of organization that is historically rare in the United States, but fairly common elsewhere around the world: the student union.

Student unions mobilize students by engaging them around issues which affect a majority of all

“Administrators depend on the daily labor of students to keep the university running. This is obviously true of student workers in dining halls or dorms. But it is also true of students' academic lives — going to classes, submitting papers, and taking exams.”

students. To achieve their goals, student unions can leverage students' labor-power by going on strike and forcing university bosses to the bargaining table.

This spring, we'll see which YDSA chapters around the country are capable of organizing student strikes for Palestine, free speech, and possibly broader economic demands.

To pull off a student strike, YDSA chapters and allied organizations will need to build academic organizing committees, call mass meetings, and run strike authorization votes. If the strikes succeed, these organizing structures can and should become a foundation for launching student unions as permanent organizations.

Taking it nationwide

Student unions fill a gap in the political infrastructure of individual campuses. But the absence of a mass student organization is a problem felt at the national level, too.

Republicans and Democrats feel free to cut funding to higher education, carry out witch hunts against pro-Palestine organizations, and pass laws that hurt young workers because they know that student resistance is sporadic, disorganized, and immature—when it happens at all.

Students haven't always lacked national representation. From 1978 through the 2000s, the

United States Student Association lobbied at state and federal levels on behalf of students and, in its heyday, supported important campaigns like Students Against Sweatshops. But in 2017, USSA failed to elect a new leadership and became defunct.

The key weakness of USSA was its membership structure. The association claimed an enormous membership of one million students, but this was only because of its composite structure as a federation of student governments. These student governments would affiliate with USSA and funnel some of their student fees upwards to the association.

USSA's "membership" comprised all of these fee-paying students, few of whom had likely even heard of USSA. Without an actively-engaged membership and dependent on student governments that were themselves subject to policies dictated by state governments, USSA was vulnerable to Republican backlash. In the mid-2010s, it ran out of money and succumbed to infighting.

If we're going to rebuild a nationwide student association, it must be built on a foundation of fighting organizations at key campuses, not institutional student government structures (which are better understood as parts of the university "state," not autonomous organizations).

This organization—call it the United States Student Union—would be formed by affiliating campus-level organizations to the parent union, just like how labor union locals affiliate to parent unions and federations like the UAW and AFL-CIO.

At a certain point, the national student union could take the initiative by dispatching organizers to new campuses to seed new locals from above. At nationwide conventions, delegates could elect leaders and ratify a common program and campaign.

This program would aim to get the broadest possible constituency of students into struggle for demands that are widely and deeply felt: lowering the costs of tuition and housing, fully funding universities, and giving students meaningful control over the conditions of their education.

This program would be realized not through insider lobbying but through class-struggle unionism: systematic organizing, militant strikes, and open collective bargaining.

Student unions aren't the same as socialist organizations, nor are they built to fight for single issues. But the socialist and issue-based student Left—including YDSA and SJP—will still have a very important role in these organizations.

The student Left needs a sea of struggle to swim in if we want our ideas to have any chance of changing the world. By taking the lead in building the student union movement, we will create a constituency of organized students open to hearing our ideas about socialism and international solidarity.

The ultimate horizon of student unionism lies in its potential to politicize millions of ordinary students and introduce them to the struggle for socialism. In Quebec and Brazil, student unions are vibrant spaces for political activism, with different factions of students affiliated with

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The United States Student Association went defunct in 2017, partially because of its failure to democratically engage its million paper members.



various left-wing groupings and parties competing for leadership in the movement.

We aim to win a world where all people have the right to higher education, and where universities serve people, not profit. To win that world, we will need massive collective power that can wrest the institutions of daily life away from capitalists and their hired administrators.

Workers must be at the center of this movement, but students can make an important contribution. With a nationwide student union and militant, bottom-up organizing, we'll have the power to take our universities back for the class that makes them work.

David Purucker is a member of University of Oregon YDSA.

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May Day at the University of Oregon encampment in spring 2024.





***“The 1 percent have a vast
armory of material resources
and political special forces, but
the 99 percent have an army.”***

Jane McAlevey

1964-2024