Enlisted in struggle
Being Marxist in a time of protracted crisis

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Abstract: In this article, I analyze Marxist activists’ narratives of becoming Marxist and their practices in activist spaces. Drawing on Jeffrey Juris and Alex Khansnabish’s notion of “militant ethnography” and on Jodi Dean’s recuperation of the political party form of organizing, I ethnographically describe activists’ motivations to become Marxist and examine two events—a pro-Bernie political meeting and an anti-Trump rally—in which activists intervened with the Marxist idea of “uniting working-class struggles” in democratic spaces. I argue that the socialist party form of organization addresses two related dilemmas that anti-capitalist activists face in the context of systemic economic and political crises in the United States: how to develop class consciousness and how to engage in the seemingly impossible, personally risky endeavor of radically challenging capitalism.

Keywords: capitalist realism, class struggle, Marxism, militant ethnography, social movements, socialism

Socialism in the United States has been undergoing a revival since Occupy Wall Street. While it is uncertain how many people today agree with the program of collective workers’ control of the means of production, the abolition of the capitalist state, and the transition to communism, it is undeniable that tens of thousands (likely many more) people in the United States now deeply question capitalism. They also participate in volunteer anti-capitalist organizations, principally the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) but also smaller organizations further to the left. While this emergent movement has produced a voluminous internal literature, little if any social scientific, let alone ethnographic, work has engaged it.

In this article, I draw upon almost eight years of work, both as a participant and as an ethnographer, in the United-States-based Marxist movement, mainly in California’s Bay Area. My research consists of almost 40 interviews with activists—mainly members of the Trotskyist group Socialist Alternative, with a few exceptions between the ages of 25 and 35, self-identified as either working class or precariously middle class—as well as informal conversations and participant observation in public political activities. Through an analysis both of interlocutors’ narratives of becoming Marxist and their practices in activist spaces, I describe how and why they commit to Marxism and how they navigate moments of intervention or praxis.
argue that the socialist party form addresses, for activists, two related dilemmas, deeply rooted in the history of white supremacy and class struggle (or “objective conditions”) in the United States: how to develop class consciousness and how to engage in the risky endeavor of radically challenging capitalism.

After a methodological and theoretical framing, I move to an overview of activists’ self-descriptions about entering Marxist politics and then to an analysis of their practice of these politics. With respect to the latter, I focus on two public events, respectively organized and co-organized, by the Bay Area branches of Socialist Alternative in 2016. The first occurred in the immediate aftermath of Bernie Sanders’s concession to Hillary Clinton in the Democratic presidential nomination campaign; the second was a mass protest against the election of Donald Trump. Both events gave activists opportunities to subject their ideas about Marxist organizing—in particular, the idea of uniting diverse struggles around a working-class program—to tests in complex, multivocal political settings.

Militant ethnography

My approach is inspired by the notion of “militant ethnography” (Juris and Khansnabish 2013), in which the anthropologist tacks between the more traditional position of impartial ethnographer and that of the activist’s more politicized role. Constraints of space do not allow a satisfactory engagement with militant positionality here. What I wish to highlight at present is my attempt to interweave this method throughout the writing of this article, in particular with respect to how activist spaces and work have shaped my own theory. I offer a personal anecdote before considering this issue more theoretically.

I have worked with a number of organizations during the past eight years including Socialist Alternative and the DSA. These groups brought together individuals involved in arenas of struggle from workplace and tenant organizing to interventions in electoral campaigns and social movement work. Branch, political education, and committee meetings along with biannual national congresses in these groups were spaces where members collectively theorized struggles within a socialist framework. Though these meetings—of which I have attended hundreds—were not always productive, I am struck by how the majority contributed to developing my thinking and confidence as an activist. “You’re an academic,” one of my comrades, a long-time worker and militant, once told me during a branch meeting about a year into my work with Socialist Alternative, “but you don’t talk or act like one.” He meant it, and I took it, as recognition, by a respected comrade, of my developing skill as an organizer. An earlier version of myself would have been astonished and, perhaps, offended.

This was a version of an experience, mundanely transformative, shared by many interlocutors. Participating in meetings and other activist events and deploying the conceptual terminology of Marxism was, for me, fundamental to the work of moving beyond thinking and “theorizing” as a middle-class academic and toward doing so as a Marxist.

The political theorist and communist Jodi Dean contrasts Marxist political education within socialist parties with more recent neoliberal iterations of social movement education.

Dean writes that social movement rhetoric is now dominated by reductive notions of identity, conceptualized as a “ground of struggle” rather than as a contested “site of struggle” (2019: 16). Those desiring to participate in movements are offered the path of individualized self-education and “allyship,” one that is consumerist and “disconnected from a collective critical practice, detached from political positions and goals” (2019: 20).

The Marxist party, by contrast, aspires to meet workers “where they are” in their contradictory, complicated lives. It seeks to bring workers into a higher, unified class consciousness and militancy. Dean stresses accountability
and collectivity, in particular that which is carried by the term “comrade” in its illocutionary function, which in practice becomes “an ego ideal: the point from which party members assess themselves as doing important, meaningful work. Being accountable to another entails seeing your actions through their eyes. Are you letting them down or are you doing work that they respect and admire?” (2019: 4).

As became clear from conversations with interlocutors, seeing with one’s actions through a comrade’s eyes does not only result from accountability but also from seeing oneself as situated in a long tradition of working-class struggle, of which the party is a kind of archive. Being a comrade means, further, that you have like-minded militants at your back. Committing to a revolutionary Marxist project, as Dean explains, is an acknowledgment that communism is “the long fight” that can only be fought together beyond “one-off actions” with “comrades you can count on” (2019: 4).

The dominant anthropological literature on political movements (Della Porta 2006; Flood 2021; Graeber 2009; Juris and Pleyers 2009; Maeckelbergh 2009; Razsa 2015) has focused on, and often celebrated, so-called “decentralized and horizontalist” (non-hierarchical) anti-capitalist organizing, which emerged especially after the fall of the Soviet Union. My interlocutors, by contrast, would agree with Dean’s recuperation of the socialist party to meet conundrums posed by objective class-struggle conditions in the United States. They see this form as a more powerful instrument for uniting diverse struggles, as an arena where workers come together to democratically discuss movement tactics and strategy. It was with this perspective that Socialist Alternative activists attempted to intervene in the political mass events that I discuss below.

Applying Dean’s insights, we can see that the militant ethnographer does not merely practice reflexivity, which can often take the neoliberal forms just mentioned. Rather, they ask how ethnography is informed by the “collective critical practice” of radical anti-capitalist spaces. In my own case, I began to experience an irreconcilable contradiction between the extractive, neoliberal model of ethnography, the baggage I carried from previous socialization, and the communist model theorized by Dean. More specifically, terms such as “comrade,” along with concepts like “democratic movement spaces” and “uniting struggles,” taught to me by more experienced activists, became central to theorizing the meaning to activists of the party form.

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Individuals are motivated to join groups like the DSA and Socialist Alternative for a variety of reasons, but a main thread running through comrades’ narratives highlights a combination of political and social trends and a group’s visible involvement in activism or political education. As one comrade put it, workers and young people gravitate to socialist groups because they propose practical solutions to the material crises we face, but also, as another comrade put it, because they offer meaning. For the latter, Socialist Alternative illuminated a “path for (working class) struggle” in a society that otherwise pushes down working-class people.

Struggle connotes, in part, a negation of what Mark Fisher (2009) has called “capitalist realism,” the daily submission to the idea that there is no alternative to capitalism, but it also has a positive valence and answers the question of how heightened class consciousness can be achieved. This is reflected in the comment made by a Minneapolis-based Socialist Alternative comrade on a public Facebook post: “Almost from the minute I got [to Minneapolis], I felt enlisted in local struggle even as I was being embraced as a newcomer to its political and cultural particularities.” They added:

In reciprocity to the leviathan (sic) efforts of some of the most tireless and dedicated organizers I’ve ever had the honor of knowing, ordinary people, the rank-and-file of the city’s working class, simply
give more of themselves—whether it be an hour here or there volunteering, showing up to a community meeting or a rally, donating another dollar to a radical membership-based organization, or opening themselves towards taking on a more revolutionary role, this place is special because ordinary people dare to imagine and support political alternatives through heightened levels of self-sacrifice.

Others often articulated similar themes in relation to joining an openly socialist organization. They expressed a frustration with the alternatives for left-wing activism in mainstream society, such as reforming the Democratic Party or “realignment.” They were also suspicious of the nonprofit sector, which many saw as aligned with the Democrats. Occupy’s lack of structure or demands was also problematic. To this they juxtaposed Vladimir Lenin’s idea of the (communist) “party of a new type” or the earlier iteration of the party originating in the reformist Second International (Blanc 2019; Elbaum 2018: 148—151).

Finally, they found Marxist party-type organizations—at least some of them—to be more democratic and inclusive than other far-left formations, which they critiqued as elitist subcultures.

Alex, an International Women’s Strike organizer and member of another Marxist organization who I got to know well in common work, further concretized the meaning of “struggle” and situated it, indissociably, alongside membership in a communist-type organization. To really be a Marxist, she said, you have to take active part in contemporary struggles, but you do not start by pretending that your organization is a mass organization. You start with struggles you are involved in and your party comrades provide you support in the form of Marxist ideas and their class-struggle experiences. Through that, you can collectively plan to win those around you to Marxism, and eventually you can scale up toward the goal of becoming a communist party with mass influence. Hailing from a Latin American country with a rich tradition of working-class militancy and Marxism, she spoke from personal experience.

Alex situated Marxists’ emphasis on learning from the history of past struggles within the socialist party form of organization. The two are inseparable in her analysis. The notion that the party is an educator, or “memory,” of the working class—a repository of the historical memory and lessons from past struggles—was centered by many other interlocutors. In an interview in 2017, Grant, a Black Lives Matter and Socialist Alternative organizer based in New York, centered the idea of class memory: “I strongly believe in the idea of historical memory. Capitalism works in sound-bites, with the idea that things are constantly changing.” This anti-historical logic, he argues, helps capitalism reproduce itself. To concretize this and to contrast it to a Marxist conception of historical memory, he deployed an idea drawn from Ghana:

I believe in the concept of the Sankofa bird, the bird that’s always looking back on the past. As working people engage in struggle, of course they have to engage with concrete contemporary questions, lack of food, poor housing, police terror. But they also have to have a historical memory, that these (problems) are not new, that that’s how power under capitalism works. Any people engaged in struggle have to know where their struggle flows from, where their tactics and strategy come from.

For Marxists, these are not just idle musings on the importance of “learning from history.” They are reflections on the fundamental importance of understanding that the interests of capitalists and workers are always in conflict and of the correct approach to organization in the workers’ struggle.

Objective conditions

The popularity, on the left, of Sanders and Seattle City Councilor Kshama Sawant, a Socialist
Alternative member (Silverstein 2021), and, on the right, of Trump, are subjective (political) responses to objective material conditions. A generation ago, economists began to deploy the term “secular stagnation” to describe a US economy with chronic low growth resulting from exploding debt and wealth inequality (Magdoff and Sweezy 1987). As Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy (1987) explain, low growth, large excess capacity, and endemic unemployment are structural to monopoly capitalism. The financialization of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries merely exacerbated the system’s contradictions, triggering waves of speculative bubbles and deepening stagnation. In this context, capitalists have resorted to intensified rounds of accumulation by dispossession to generate profits (Brenner 2020). This, in turn, has produced or intensified a host of effects such as global warming, state carcerality and militarized border regimes, deepening racial and gender oppressions, and gentrification and other forms of primitive accumulation (Endnotes 2020; Federici 2018; Jay 2017; Jones 2016).

These objective conditions pose a conundrum for the socialist movement. Deteriorating material conditions both make workers, especially those suffering racial, gender, and other forms of oppression, less able to spare time and energy on political organizing and, contrarily, more potentially radicalized. The specific history of the United States is an even more imposing objective impediment. The US bourgeois regime’s origins as a slaveocracy and white supremacist terror state still cast a long shadow. This is a history in which racism has been a potent tool for destroying independent working-class movements. Especially after World War II, anti-communism became the expression of this synthesis of white supremacy and hostility to labor, an instrument of repression that US imperialism deployed both domestically and internationally to smash justice movements (Bevins 2020; Burden-Stelly 2021). As Grant discussed above, one of the most important roles of the Marxist party is as an educator in class struggle, and one of its basic lessons is that fascism grows out of the crises of capitalism.

**Openings for the far right**

For my interlocutor and comrade Jake, reading early communist analyses of monopoly capitalism and the rise of fascism at an Oakland branch meeting was eye-opening on the crisis tendencies just described, and helped, in particular, in understanding the far right (Zetkin [1923] 2017). Jake grew up poor in the Deep South and moved around a number of progressive and radical groups in the South and on the West Coast. In high school, his girlfriend’s father, a “middlemen” for a small business, had politics that would now be called “Trumpist.” “For me, the right wing is very real. This is something (I feel) that a lot of the left doesn’t get. If things collapse, the right is ready to step into the breach.” He elaborated with a critique of reformism, in which he included not only Democrats but a large swathe of the new social democratic movement. They seem “to just want tweaks here and there. (They’re) not ready for revolutionary struggle, for taking power. I feel there’s a lot of, maybe unconscious, dependency among the left,” a dependence on both the nonprofits and the Democratic Party, including Bernie Sanders. These leftists are just waiting “for someone to come in and be their savior.”

Rereading Jake’s comments, made in 2017, a year after the 6 January 2021 pro-Trump riot, I am struck by his prescience. A lot of those right-wing people, he said, “think the government is thoroughly corrupt. They’re very anti-corporate, which they think of as ‘big business,’ but they’re still very capitalist, in the sense of being for ‘small businesses.’ A lot of them support both Trump and Sanders.” And this is why, he urges, “the left must differentiate itself from the Democratic Party and liberalism.”

**Reformism versus revolution**

Other interlocutors shared Jake’s fears that capitalism’s current crisis is fertile soil for far right...
tendencies that have long festered in US society. This analysis often went along with the organizational question. Activists’ logic went like this: if capitalism will inherently fall into crisis and if this creates openings for the far right, what type of organizing do we need to do to prevent that? If the Democratic Party and the nonprofits are ineffective in combating the aforementioned tendencies, might they even inadvertently contribute to them by demobilizing workers? This did not mean that these activists never worked with Democrats or liberals. There are many examples of fronts between the left and liberals. To mention a few, there was the 2017 Women’s March, Sawant’s tactical alliances with progressive Democrats on Seattle City Council, and periodic common work with nonprofits. When Marxists do go into such collaborations, however, they tend to do so under the tactic of the “united front.” That is, they maintain their organizational structures, rejecting calls to dissolve them into larger “mass” formations, and they retain their right to critique such alliances.

A good example is offered by Robert, a Black Lives Matter and tenant organizer and Socialist Alternative member from St. Louis. For him, being in a Marxist organization helped bring both a revolutionary and an international perspective on the struggle against racist police murders and a path out of the dilemmas of Occupy’s collapse. In contrast to the latter, Marxism helped him better understand the necessity of articulating political demands—for example, anti-racist and police abolitionist demands—along with economic demands.

A US Army veteran radicalized by his deployment to Iraq, Robert became active as a communist when he moved to St. Louis in 2013. “When Mike Brown got murdered, I started appreciating more (the Marxist) approach to movements.” He described how both the intensive reading of history and theory within the Socialist Alternative activist space and the support he received to intervene in local struggles helped him better understand the demobilizing role of the Democrats and nonprofits. The insights of more experienced international comrades also helped: “I was having lots of conversations with comrades from South Africa and trying to apply their insights. Some of the conversations [involved] trying to figure out how to connect police brutality to issues of wealth inequality and how to show that to folks, how to show how the fight in Ferguson is relevant to people outside of North St. Louis, the larger community, because at first it was just people from Ferguson that were involved, ordinary folks from the community.”

“I took lots of analysis from Occupy, the original writings from the Black Panther Party, synthesizing them,” he continued. One insight “was the need for demands. How do we actually make more demands to broaden [the] movement? For example, in the Ferguson movement there were a significant number activists arguing for boycotts without concrete demands.” By “concrete demands,” he meant that “it takes organization to boycott, which wasn’t there. What I did was to argue for a democratic structure within the movement. If we want a boycott to happen, then there needs to be a way that the community can voice what their demands are.” The key question, he went on, was how “to demand justice for Mike Brown while also making broader demands to help the community overall.” Being an organized Marxist helped him see that that political basis for the boycott was conservative: “The idea that the Black community has billions of dollars of purchasing power, what that does is it obfuscates the point about systemic inequality, and also it doesn’t require the amount of energy that would push the movement forward, where you need people on the street.”

For Robert, one of the positive effects of being active in a Marxist party (Dean 2019) was in the theoretical and organizational support it provided in navigating the diverse struggles highlighted by the police murder of Mike Brown, struggles to address the intersecting poverty, class exploitation, and racism that intensified the vulnerability of the Black working class (Jay 2017). Further, Marxism offered a model of organization that could democratically bring together and thereby empower these currents of
struggle. In the remainder of this article, I analyze two examples where Bay Area Socialist Alternative members similarly attempted to apply the communist principle of working-class unity. While the first helped build activists’ confidence and commitment to the group, the second challenged members to rethink their approach, in particular with respect to coalitional work.

“Fuck dogma!”

Bernie Sanders’s run for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 2016 confronted Marxists with a conundrum. Unlike the DSA, which had always followed their founder Michael Harrington’s injunction that they represent the reformist “left wing of the possible,” Trotskyist groups such as Socialist Alternative, the International Socialist Organization (ISO), and Solidarity rejected political support for Democrats. The editors of Black Agenda Report (BAR), self-identified revolutionary (non-Trotskyist) socialists, expressed a common sentiment with their slogan that the Democrats were “the more effective evil.” Yet here was Sanders, openly defining himself as a socialist, attacking the neoliberal wing of the Democrats and figures like Henry Kissinger, and firing the imaginations of a large section of the US youth. By the end of 2016, the DSA’s membership quintupled, from around 5,000 to 25,000 dues-paying members, on Sanders’s coattails.

Unlike other revolutionary left organizations, Socialist Alternative decided to support, albeit critically, the Sanders campaign. While this tactic was vigorously debated within the organization, a majority of the membership agreed with the perspective that by popularizing socialism, Sanders’s campaign would heighten the conflicts within the Democratic Party and advance the process of the formation of an independent workers’ party. They did not want to stand outside that process as, they felt, other revolutionary groups were mistakenly doing.

In mid-July 2016, about a month after Hillary Clinton defeated Sanders in the California Democratic primary, Socialist Alternative Bay Area organized a “Beyond Bernie” public meeting at the Berkeley Public Library, which would, it was hoped, help crystallize the kind of democratic space discussed earlier by Robert. Because Sanders had always made it clear that, should he lose, he would mobilize his supporters for Clinton, many who had gravitated toward his program and who refused to support Clinton wondered what the next steps were. A week before the meeting, and adding solemnity to it, were the police murders of two Black men, Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile near St. Paul. Numerous Socialist Alternative Beyond Bernie meetings, held nationally, represented the organization’s attempt to intervene in this moment. Over 200 people attended the Berkeley meeting, of whom only 19 were Socialist Alternative members, many more than we expected. This caused some logistical difficulties: the meeting, which was standing-room only and consisted of short speeches by audience members, became somewhat chaotic.

During her opening speech, a Socialist Alternative Bay Area leader stated: “Obama said that we won’t resolve the history of racism in his lifetime and probably not in his daughters’ lifetime. Well, the Black Lives Matter activists taking to the streets can’t wait until Obama’s daughters grow old.” The attendees reacted with enthusiasm. The comrade’s message, that the struggle against racism is winnable, and militant street uprisings, such as the current one being led by Black organizers, will lead the way, seemed to resonate. This framed the meeting by posing the question: what strategy would both advance the struggle against racism and build upon the popular demands of the Sanders campaign?

After video greetings from Sawant and Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein, who both discussed future common work between their organizations, numerous people lined up to give statements. Only four speakers, a small minority, were Socialist Alternative members. The first, rushing to the front, was a member of the Spartacist League. A tiny group often seen selling their Workers Vanguard paper at events
organized by other groups, their main “organizing tactic” seems to consist of haranguing other leftists for being sellouts. As if on cue, she immediately launched into a denunciation of the “opportunist” Sawant and Sanders. While a few other speakers made similar attacks, most focused instead on their particular causes, from teenagers who talked about a campaign to reduce the voting age to 16 to a member of the Alameda Green Party who encouraged attendees to register Green, to a person wanting to sue the Democratic National Committee for voting corruption.

When another person, a member of the Peace and Freedom Party, attacked Socialist Alternative for “endorsing” a “Democratic” politician, an audience member yelled out “FUCK DOGMA! FUCK DOGMA!” Some Socialist Alternative members told him to be quiet and to let the speaker continue. Each person who wanted to speak was allowed to and given an equal amount of time, approximately two minutes. There was a rough balance between voices that were sympathetic to Socialist Alternative, neutral, and critical of the group.

Politically, the attendees were a microcosm of the US left. The majority had reformist politics and were focused on elections. This includes those who wanted to reform the Democratic Party and the overlapping group whose definition of socialism was coterminous with Sanders’s Scandinavian-inspired social democracy. A minority, by contrast, were dogmatic, sectarian types who seemed to only want to come to political events to tell others why they were “wrong.” It did feel during and after the meeting that, compared to the reformist types, our organization presented a sharper, more focused, class-struggle message, and vis-à-vis the sectarian we seemed serious, realistic, and good listeners. Most importantly, we seemed to have effectively both clarified the difference between the reformism on display and Marxism, and disseminated the idea that what is needed to win the reforms for which Sanders was calling was an independent party that could unite diverse struggles.

This relative success was not a spontaneous product of our members’ meritorious qualities but a combination of external events and correct organization. Most of our Bay Area branch members, like me, were new to political organizing. Most of us were trying to apply the political education with which we had been collectively engaged at least since that summer’s national party congress, with its workshops and detailed debates on the “Bernie tactic.” This involved consistent attention to a set of interrelated questions: which demands resonate widely with the working class, which of these are unlikely to be conceded by the ruling class, and how do we create spaces where people in struggle can meet to discuss next steps?

A few days later, branch leaders sent out a debrief. While it was generally positive, it also cautioned against overestimating our “subjective” (leadership) role. The higher-than-expected attendance owed more to the recent California Democratic primary than to members’ organizing efforts. But it did also highlight positive aspects of our intervention, which included our distinguishing ourselves from “the ultraleft.” Moreover, while our comrades attempted to “generalize and argue for the bringing together of movements that a mass workers’ party could represent,” the vast majority of other attendees “spoke to their own small agendas, such as detailed aspects of electoral reform, promoting their nonprofit work, a protest on this or that, overwhelming (sic) pointing people away from coming together.”

At the time of the Beyond Bernie public meeting, we counted among our Bay Area branches a few dozen members, mostly young—with an average age in the mid-20s—and politically inexperienced. Most had been active socialists for barely a year. By contrast, the multiple Seattle branches, with which I volunteered on the 2015 Sawant campaign, was (by Leninist group standards) large, numbering by my own estimate in the triple digits, and counted numerous seasoned activists along with a larger periphery of non-member supporters in the city’s labor and social movements. This meeting was, in the lo-
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A setback

The night of the 2016 presidential election, my partner and I hosted a Socialist Alternative election watch party and fundraiser at our home in Oakland. About a dozen comrades came out. As the results began to indicate a Trump victory, a stunned silence came over the gathering. A comrade named Aaron, a leading Seattle activist sent by the national organization to Oakland to help build our branch, stood out for his sang-froid. He and a few others proposed that we organize an anti-Trump rally in Oakland’s Oscar Grant Plaza (OGP), a central location just off City Hall that had been the focal point of Occupy Oakland five years earlier. Within a few short hours of our posting the Facebook event for the rally, about 5,000 people indicated that they would attend.

The next day, November 9, was a blur. Our strategy involved having two to three comrades give speeches, respectively, on the responsibility of the Democratic Party for the debacle and the need for working-class independence, followed by leading a march in downtown Oakland along with flyering and recruitment. I volunteered to give a speech on a “party of the 99 percent,” a tactic then favored by national Socialist Alternative and a synthesis between the slogan of Occupy and the Leninist notion of a party of class unity.

Shortly before 5:00 pm, about two dozen of us headed over to OGP, which was starting to fill with people. The plaza is a complex of spaces including an amphitheater and a large grassy public space off of City Hall, and is the usual gathering point for large political events in the city. The initial trickle of attendees quickly turned into the largest crowd I and everyone to whom I spoke had seen there since Occupy, an overflow gathering. The energy and atmosphere were beginning to get palpably intense.

We set up a table with newspapers, pamphlets, and buttons at the back of the crowd, near the intersection of Broadway and 14th Street, but it soon got swallowed up by the crowd and generated little interest. The mood of the attendees, it would soon become clear, was intensely angry and not many people were interested in political discussions with activists from, for Oaklanders, a still obscure organization. I remember my heart racing in response to this mood (and it still does a little bit today), so uniquely effervescent it was.

Aaron had coordinated with more experienced Oakland comrades to reach out to other organizations that offered to support the event. This is how we came to co-emcee the rally with Cat Brooks, an eminent Oakland Black Lives Matter leader and future mayoral candidate along with some of her comrades from Oakland’s Anti Police Terror Project (APTP). Brooks and the APTP were (and are still) well-known in Oakland’s activist community. That they shared the stage with us we saw, initially, as a credit to our organization, though eventually we, and maybe they, came to see the collaboration more ambivalently.

Soon after 5:00 pm, with the sun going down, Aaron, looking down from a raised stage, asked me whether I would be willing to be the first speaker. “Sure,” I unthinkingly said. Fate would soon intervene to prevent me from going first. Aaron soon asked if it would be okay if another comrade, Chris, went first and whether I would not mind moving his (Aaron’s) car, which in a hurry he had illegally parked. I was one of the only people in the group who knew how to drive a stick shift.

After parking the car, I took a spot behind the stage. Chris, a white man in his early 20s and an inexperienced party member, began his speech, and the situation almost immedi-
ately unraveled. He received some initial light applause when he called out Trump for being racist and misogynist. However, when he then launched into how eight years of “the first Black president” brought no promised change or hope, the heckling started. I still remember cringing at Chris’s tone-deaf remark and thinking: “Oh shit, we bit off more than we can chew.” Chris became defensive and started talking about how he was then reading a book on the Black Panthers, then moved into a somewhat excruciating anecdote about how his younger brother, who is gay, called him in tears after Trump won. It came off as pandering.

As more hecklers began piling on, Chris exited the stage, visibly shaken. I went up to him, patted him on the back, and told him not to beat himself up for it. I made a mental note to discuss with him later lessons from this incident. The next speaker was a middle-aged African American man, a prominent leader from the APTP. He tore into Chris. He spoke about how he would not allow a white man to lecture him about the history of “my people.” This brought huge cheers. His speech was passionate, full of rousing rhetoric, as were the following speeches, including the one by Cat Brooks, a brilliant public speaker. My heart sank. I went up to Aaron and told him that my speech, which now seemed hopelessly academic if not pedantic, would be a disaster. Admittedly, I was especially nervous about the topic of my speech, on the necessity of a multiracial party, in a moment where Black and other BIPOC speakers were focusing on the racial trauma of the imminent Trump presidency. Eventually, the speeches ended, and the marchers took to the streets. The energy of the rally’s initial moments dissipated, the result of a combination of police crowd control and a lack of clear political leadership and messaging. Specifically, although the other speakers were rhetorically sharp, none offered an answer to the question of “where to next?” that we, in our admittedly fumbling way, were trying to address. The much-hoped-for scaling up from the Beyond Bernie event would, at least in the Bay Area, have to wait for at least some months.

The Oakland protest was part of a wave of large protests around the country. Our participation and attempt to lead it exposed important flaws in Bay Area Socialist Alternative’s organizing capacity. In particular, our inexperienced group had yet to develop deep, organic connections both with the region’s working class and with its large, diverse activist community. Further, our tactics that day had failed to consider that the Democrats, and Obama in particular, were more popular than we had predicted. Our less-than-thorough tactical preparation was exposed by our lack of strategy for a protest that we should have expected to be large, angry, and impatient with speeches more appropriate for calmer settings. On the positive side, our role in the protest, which was covered by CNN and other major media outfits, did gain some national attention. Several contacts reached out to our national organization to ask about joining. Our organization gained a small number of new members and received a brief moment of positive media coverage, but, at least in Oakland, we learned that we had not yet done the work of basic coalition-building, let alone that of creating an organization that can, to paraphrase Lenin, win masses upon masses of workers to communism.

Conclusion

The 2016–2017 anti-Trump protests were a key moment in which the small US socialist movement sought to pose the question of working-class political independence. Should the movement break with the Democratic Party or not? Groups like Socialist Alternative, the ISO, and others at this time were quickly eclipsed by the “big tent” DSA, which, with its much larger membership and reformist politics, effectively answered the question in the negative. This eventuated in two crises in the movement, one in the revolutionary wing and, eventually, another in the reformist wing. The former either folded their organizations into the DSA or dissolved. The latter, represented by the DSA, re-
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turned “to form as a social-democratic lobbying operation within a capitalist party,” a party that “now oversee(s) a society in full-blown crisis, ravaged by Omicron, record levels of inflation, and horrific climate disasters” (Smith and Post 2022).

If the revolutionary wing of the socialist movement has posed the question of political independence, the Black Lives Matter movement, which led some of the largest protests in US history in the summer of 2020, showed that the potential for it exists. It was no surprise—at least from a socialist perspective—that the US regime met this movement both with repression and cooptation. The compounding crises in which the United States finds itself entangled are both clarifying and disorienting. They clarify the enormous violence, structural and physical, required to reproduce the contemporary racial capitalist order. But it is also challenging to grasp the trajectory of events clearly. With one half of the political regime more openly embracing authoritarianism, it is undeniable that something sinister is rumbling within US society. My interlocutor Jake’s comments about the actuality of the far right in the United States are both prescient and arresting. They also express the paradox that, as the far right builds a base by conjuring the specter of communism, the only thing that can stop it is a revolutionary labor movement—in short, politically, communism.

Even liberals are now developing a materialist analysis of fascism and figuring out that racism is a ruling class tool to divide the working class. A Marxist might say “better late than never,” but the solutions on offer are, as we would also say, “idealistic and utopian.” They propose, for example, that “we have to agree on basic democratic principles” such as respecting one person—one vote and recommitting to electoralism. The interlocutors profiled here know that these are illusions, that the threat of fascism is the sharp end of the capitalist class’s arsenal to prevent self-emancipation by the working class. The crisis gestates in decades of economic development and manifests in the violence of the right and the confusions of the left.

Despite these setbacks, my interlocutors continue to participate in revolutionary organizations, including Socialist Alternative and others that (unlike Socialist Alternative) refuse to fold into the DSA, and which continue to adhere to the Marxist party form. For them, the intensifying general crisis is continuous with the history of US racism and capitalism. Unlike the disorientation experienced by large swathes of the left, they seem both more serene and steely in their determination to win workers to Marxism. This should not be puzzling. While liberals and progressives, who are usually disorganized—lacking organizations rooted in Marxist theory and history—tend toward demoralization (“fascism is around the corner!”), the Marxists profiled here and many others know that they have comrades at their back in the long struggle for socialism.

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Notes

2. I was active in Socialist Alternative between spring 2014 and spring 2017. Along with interviews, I conducted research at public events (e.g., 2016 anti-inauguration protests). While I avoided research during internal organization events, my experience in these settings informed and deepened my research.
3. Dean’s main example is the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), but her analysis is equally applicable to socialist party or party-like organizations from other traditions.
4. This is not to say that today’s socialists agree on what this would look like, what the timeline should be, or how to relate to historical debates on the party, which go back to the 1870s. This a lively debate, reflected in a diversity of engaging socialist websites each with contributors steeped in these debates. A detailed engagement is beyond my scope here, but broadly speaking, there are four contemporary tendencies:

   - Trotskyists such as those in Socialist Alternative, Left Voice, the Revolutionary Socialist Network, and others, who argue for an independent workers’ party now (Juan C. 2019);
   - those who identify as “communists,” who argue for building a base in the working class first by meeting economic and social needs before setting out on the party path (Guerrero 2019);
   - “re-aligners,” represented by the right wing of the DSA, who argue for reforming the Democratic Party (Guastella 2020); and
   - “dirty breakers,” or the left wing of the DSA, who argue for building a core socialist cadre within the Democratic Party, when necessary, and independently, when possible, with the aim of eventually breaking away to form an independent workers’ party (French and Gong 2020). For an engaging overview of historical socialist debates on the party, John Molyneux’s Marxism and the Party, though published in 1978, is still perhaps the best introduction in English (Molyneux [1978] 2003).
5. All names here are pseudonyms.
6. Emphasis in the original.
7. The Ferguson Movement was the name of the movement for justice for Mike Brown before it took on the BLM name.
8. Whether this was an accurate perspective is debatable. My own view, and one of the reasons I left Socialist Alternative, was that this tactic was a failure. The Democratic Party today is even more entrenched in its hostility to the working class and more ineffective in the fight against the far right. Meanwhile, its “socialist” elements are more marginal than ever. See Smith and Post (2022) on Sanders’s and the “Squad’s” capitulation to Biden’s “imperialist Keynesianism.”
9. “Politics begin where millions of men and women are; where there are not thousands, but millions, that is where serious politics begin” (Lenin 1918).
10. The reasons for the collapse of the ISO are still debated by activists. What seems clear is that it was a combination of a corrupt leadership that attempted to cover up a sexual assault by a prominent activist and the exit of a large number of reformists who wished to dissolve the organization into the DSA.
11. The 6 January “beer gut putsch” (Smith and Post 2022) has produced a cottage industry of these latter-day liberal analysts of fascism. Two symptomatic examples are “Jason Stanley Warns: America Is Now in Fascism’s Legal Phase,” Amanpour and Company, 6 January 2022, https://youtu.be/1xkcCmdE1u4; and “Is Trump Laying the Groundwork for a Coup in 2024? Bill Moyers Weighs In,” Amanpour and Company, 5 January 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4_J5yf0VBU.
12. Unfortunately, the leading lights of “democratic socialism” are not much better than their liberal colleagues. See, for example, “Interregnum w/ Aziz Rana, Nikhil Pal Singh, Wendy Brown,” The Dig, 6 January 2022, https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/interregnum-w-aziz-rana-nikhil-pal-singh-wendy-brown/.

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