



Centering Palestinian Liberation is Essential to Revitalizing the Labor Movement

JUNE 21, 2022 by WILLEM MORRIS

Willem Morris argues that in order to build enough leverage to win socialist demands, we must center Palestinian liberation and all other forms of domination under capitalism.

Last year Columbia YDSA helped organize the **largest tuition strike** in American history. More than 1,100 Columbia students collectively withheld tuition payments in an attempt to win demands related to college affordability, campus policing, fossil fuel divestment, Palestinian liberation, and student worker union recognition.

But the administration at Columbia never even officially acknowledged the tuition strike for its entire duration. The effort was not completely futile: Columbia partially increased financial aid payments and divested from fossil fuels, without acknowledging the tuition strike, but we were ultimately unable to bring Columbia to the bargaining table despite the historic nature of our action.

Following the tuition strike, Becca Roskill, the former co-chair of Columbia YDSA was elected to the bargaining committee of the Student Workers of Columbia and helped lead a **ten-week labor strike** that won all three of the union's major demands. Even with fewer participants, the union's strike had more leverage than the tuition strike because *Columbia could not function without its workers*, especially when the length of the strike threatened Columbia's ability to **legally award credit** to its students.

The differences in the successes of the two strikes demonstrates the unique leverage provided by organized labor on college campuses. In addition to the leverage provided by withholding labor, organizing workplaces also pushes politicized leftists to engage with their co-workers who are less politically engaged to bring them into action. Most campus activism is siloed, separating groups focused on different interests and issues, but campus labor organizing pushes members of these groups to find common cause.

Some socialists mistakenly conclude that to organize workers, we must focus exclusively on universal appeals to the working class as a whole, rather than focus on fighting all forms of domination. This is a consequential mistake that ignores why many worker-leaders actually start organizing and forgets why we are fighting for socialism in the first place.

In order to organize the working class and rebuild the labor movement, YDSA must fight against racism, imperialism, sexism, homophobia and all other forms of domination. An example of this is Dartmouth YDSA, the YDSA chapter with the most impressive labor organizing success this year. Dartmouth YDSA leaders led a unionization drive of dining workers that unanimously won union recognition with a vote of 52-0 this spring. There are two things that stand out about Dartmouth YDSA: the members are almost entirely non-white and they have prioritized the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

“Race is the modality in which class is lived.”

Stuart Hall, a Jamaican sociologist, thought of race and class as intertwined. In a [1978 essay](#), Hall wrote: “Race is the modality in which class is lived.” This should be clear to anyone who has visited New York.

Last year, I worked at an Amazon warehouse in the Bronx where I was the only white person except for my manager. My whiteness did not prevent me from developing relationships with my co-workers as we shared the same exploitative work, but management saw that my race-class position was an exception. After just a few weeks, I was offered a promotion to supervisor despite my inexperience and mediocrity at packing boxes. This race-class correlation is consistent throughout the country: the net worth of a median white family [is nearly ten times](#) the net worth of a black family.

If you [listen](#) to [interviews](#) with Chris Smalls, you will notice that his main gripe against Amazon that motivated him to help organize the first American union at the company was not economic exploitation but the racism that prevented his promotion.

I applied to be a manager forty-nine times and never got it, and could never figure out why when I had all the qualifications. I did my job well, opened up three buildings, put in the work, spent so much time away from my family and kid. So, for them to have a system designed to stop black and brown people from moving up is disheartening.

Similarly for the Amazon union drive in Bessemer, Alabama, many of the black worker leaders were inspired by anti-racism as they were initially **moved to action** during the Black Lives Matter protests.

The situation in the dining halls at Dartmouth is similar. Ian Scott, one of the organizers of the Student Workers Collective at Dartmouth, **explains**: “Most of the students working there are people of color, black, or international. On certain days, a contracting group brings in Brazilian migrant workers to work in the dish room. There are a lot of people of color in the actual workforce, but the upper management is almost all white.” Ian also **participated** in the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and is a member of the Afro-American Society and YDSA. He explains:

I am on the board for the Afro-American Society, and we do general body meetings with the black community on campus every other week. We used one of those meeting times to have a presentation on the union. We connected this union push at Dartmouth and labor organizing more broadly to black power and racial justice, noting the historical participation and leadership of black people within labor movements.

The cases at Amazon and Dartmouth show that due to the interlinking of race and class, the distinction between identity politics and class politics is unclear, and *abolishing racism and capitalism necessitate interlinked political strategies*.

But what happens in the instances when race and class are decoupled, like Barack Obama’s presidential victories or workplaces that have some black managers and some white workers? When there is no choice but anti-racist individualism, people will rationally choose self-advancement. Rather than treating this as a mistaken idea, we must focus on providing a collective alternative.

Some socialists treat the turn to anti-racist individualism as the root of working class disorganization, rather than treating working class disorganization as the root of the turn to anti-racist individualism. This argument treats ideology as the driver of material conditions rather than a response to them.

As **Annie Olaloku-Teriba argues**, the turn away from the collective black radical politics of the 1960s came as a response to the Neoliberal crushing of the left in the 1970s and 1980s. Leftist governments were overthrown throughout the Third World while Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher crushed militant labor strikes in the USA and the UK. It was a time when the possibility of winning a new world through collective action ceased to seem possible for millions of people.

In this context of historic defeat, it makes sense that a generation saw individual upward mobility as the only possible route to a better life. It also makes sense that Chris Smalls first tried to improve his life by applying for a managerial position 49 times, rather than organize collectively with his multiracial co-workers because there were no other examples of unions at Amazon. But

in 2020, in the context of the Bernie Sanders campaign, Black Lives Matter uprisings and Covid **walk-outs**, he decided that collectively taking on Amazon was necessary and possible.

Many black Americans have rationally pursued individualist identity politics because of the absence of collective alternative possibilities. So, to effectively take on racism, we must organize the working class, and to effectively organize the working class, we must take on racism. This chicken and egg situation presents us with a problem, but this historical moment presents us with the possibility to address it.

Roughly 20 million people **participated** in the Black Lives Matters uprising in the United States in 2020; this is more than the number of people who have **been on strike** in the United States in the last 30 years combined. But among the 20 million Black Lives Matter protesters, there are others like Chris Smalls and Ian Scott, who can carry their anti-racism from the streets to their workplaces where they have even more leverage. The beauty of organized labor is that at places like Amazon and Dartmouth, black workers motivated by anti-racism, white workers motivated by economic exploitation, and perhaps others motivated by challenging other forms of domination, recognized the importance of working together to simultaneously challenge capitalism and other forms of domination.



The Student Worker Collective at Dartmouth demonstrates in front of the administration building.

Free Palestine (x76)

Before leading the dining workers unionization drive, Dartmouth YDSA leaders first started organizing around Palestinian liberation. In an [essay for the Dartmouth Radical](#), Kaya Çolakoğlu explains how the YDSA chapter formed following the gathering of hundreds of people for demonstrations at Dartmouth last May in protest of the Israel's murder of hundreds of Palestinians.

Dartmouth YDSA shared the conclusions of Columbia YDSA that traditional student activism lacked the leverage necessary to win its bigger demands. Inspired by the YDSA-led unionization drive at Kenyon, leaders of Dartmouth YDSA decided *to take their activism to their workplace*.

After unanimously winning union recognition, the Student Workers Collective at Dartmouth has supported Palestinian activism on campus as a union, bringing in newly organized dining workers into the common struggle for a free Palestine. The union leaders plan to continue to center Palestine in their union activism in the future.

The support for Palestine from Student Workers Collective at Dartmouth follows a recent trend of support for Palestine amongst organized labor. During the Israeli attacks last spring, unions representing trades ranging from roofers and writers to electricians and teachers [released](#) statements in support of Palestine. A few union locals also endorsed BDS resolutions. Dockworkers in California [refused](#) to load cargo onto a ship owned by a company that has shipped Israeli weaponry.

Plenty of the energy fueling the new labor upswing in the United States is being provided by supporters of Palestine, which makes the recent BDS controversy within DSA especially harmful. This spring, national DSA leadership voted to dissolve the BDS working group after the working group publicly dissented from DSA leadership's decision [not to expel](#) Jamaal Bowman for voting to provide military aid to Israel. After tremendous membership backlash to the disciplinary actions taken against the BDS working group, national leadership was forced to rescind some of its disciplinary decisions, but the conflict has had lasting consequences for DSA.

For example, student workers at Grinnell College [won](#) the first wall-to-wall undergraduate labor union, representing all student workers. The YDSA National Labor Committee has worked this spring with five undergraduate labor unions to coordinate labor activity and support new organizing drives. But the leaders of the Grinnell union, the largest undergraduate union in the country, have declined to join YDSA because of their frustration at the dissolution of the DSA BDS working group.

[Other young people](#) who have signed up for the [YDSA summer labor program](#) have indicated that they are not interested in joining YDSA for the same reasons. From private conversations, I know that some of the most committed industrial labor organizers in the country have also left DSA over the decision, and I am sure that there are even more just like them.

For the first time in living memory, we have a socialist base from which eventually winning power might be possible. To begin to win some of our demands, transform what people imagine to be possible, and begin to expand our power, we must energize- not alienate- the already existing base of socialists.

But the issue of Palestine is not just an issue of strategy. Whether or not DSA prioritizes Palestinian liberation indicates the kind of socialism we are fighting for as an organization. Winning socialism is not just about winning greater economic inequality in one country; it is about defeating all forms of domination everywhere.

This summer, YDSA is launching **Red Hot Summer**, a program to give young workers the tools to organize their workplace and discuss how the labor movement can play a role in winning fights against domination, like in Palestine. Over 600 people have already **signed up here**.

Last week, YDSA hosted an event with commentator Hasan Piker that drew **over 32,000 young people**. YDSA members and union leaders Ruby Clarke, Charlie Muller, Becca Roskill, and Ian Scott spoke about organized labor, union democracy, and the connection between organized labor and other fights on the left.

Each speaker was fantastic, but the audience's response when Ian spoke about the connections between labor and Palestine at Dartmouth was especially enthusiastic. At one point, *76 different people wrote "Free Palestine" in the chat within one minute*.

Those 32,000 young people watched the event alone in front of their computers. They might be gay or non-white. They might have experienced bullying or misogyny. They might feel lonely or feel that in some other way they do not fit within the current white, heteropatriarchal, capitalist system. And for all of these people, in Palestine, they see themselves. And if 32,000 random people can stand in solidarity with Palestinians, oppressed people who continue to fight against all odds, then perhaps they can imagine a world in which the 32,000 people could stand in solidarity with each other.

These are the people we fight for and fight with as socialists. We do not have enough power to win on our own, but if each of us builds relationships and finds common cause with our co-workers, we can build a labor movement that has enough leverage and power to take on domination in all forms and help win a free Palestine.

RED HOT SUMMER



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About Willem Morris

Willem Morris is a co-chair of the National Labor Committee and member of Columbia YDSA.

About The Activist

The Activist is a publication by and for members of the Young Democratic Socialists of America, edited by members of YDSA's National Political Education Committee and featuring the chapter reports and political commentary from YDSA activists from chapters across the country

The Activist is a multi-tendency democratic socialist publication open to submissions from all YDSA members. Articles do not necessarily reflect the position of the organization.

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[Winter 2021 Issue \(.pdf\)](#)

Submissions and Contact

Full-length articles should be 800-1200 words. Chapter reports should cover the activity of your YDSA chapter in the past few months in 100-300 words. Both types of submissions can be submitted [via e-mail to theactivistydsa@gmail.com](mailto:theactivistydsa@gmail.com)

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