

Socialist Night School Development Kit

Philadelphia Democratic Socialists of America



socialist
night school

...an approachable but rigorous series of
ideological discussions.

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Introduction

The Philadelphia DSA Socialist Night School is a year-long public education program intended to encourage a rigorous discussion of socialist issues in an accessible format. Though hosted by Philly DSA, it was designed to be free and open to the general public without regard for political affiliation or educational background. Our program has regularly attracted crowds of 30-50 people, and has become a staple of our educational activities.

Because many people asked us for materials to use in their own political education projects—and, because we more generally believe in the importance of broader dialog within DSA about political education—we decided to build a kit for our Night School. This document contains everything you will need to start designing a Night School or similar program, including a detailed summary of our own design process and sample materials you can borrow or modify to suit your own needs.

The full contents of our kit include:

- Overview Essay
- Sample: Discussion Questions
- Sample: Intro Talk
- Sample: Syllabus
- Sample: Meeting Flyer
- Template: Flyer (.pdf)
- *Democratic Left* Article

The Socialist Night School was primarily developed by members of the Philadelphia DSA Political Education Committee, with input from many teachers, theorists, activists, and rank-and-file members of DSA Chapters.

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Please contact us with questions, suggestions, or to discuss any aspect of political education!

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How to Build a Night School

The Night School is not a “school” in the conventional sense. There are no grades or Powerpoint slides, no fees or enrollment lists, and no prerequisites. Anyone—DSA member or not—can attend the Night School. They may do so for as many or few sessions as they choose. Familiarity with socialist theory is not assumed, and attendees may participate in discussions as much or as little as they like.

In Philadelphia’s current program, the Night School meets twice per month and is scheduled to last from July 2017 until May 2018. Alternative structures (e.g. a 3- or 6-month program, monthly meetings) can easily be developed and could take into account any number of factors (e.g. a less active or widely dispersed population, a busier organizing calendar).

The Night School is similar to traditional Left programs such as a *Jacobin* Reading Group. What separates the Night School from many similar projects is its systematic and comprehensive scope. The Night School is intended as a survey of a wide range of perspectives, from historical to contemporary, from densely theoretical to imminently practical, and across the spectrum of left politics. For this reason, it casts a wider net than those groups that focus on a single author or topic (e.g. Marx, Marxist Aesthetics). This is because our goal was to design an educational program inclusive of the broadest range of participants, from those people attending their first DSA event to those with extensive backgrounds in political theory.

Educational Goals

Socialists engage in intellectual activity not simply because political questions are interesting, but because the answers to those questions shape the world. The Night School is not intended as a substitute for organizing work, nor is it based on the assumption that one must know *Capital* in its entirety in order to be active on the left. Scholarship is no substitute for the hard work of organizing.

Even so, we reject the dichotomy all too commonly drawn between theory and practice. Further, we take seriously the role of intellectual activity—of writing, thinking,

and debate—that has always animated leftist activity. Ultimately, we believe that the left can only hope to be a political force if we link thought to action.

In this sense, the Night School is more than just a reading group. It is intended to offer DSA a space for serious thinking about the past, present, and future of the Left. On its face, putting together a discussion group can seem rather trivial: pick some readings, find a space, and then start talking. But this larger goal comes with unique challenges that should shape a political education program.

Our slogan for the Night School is “an approachable but rigorous series of ideological discussions.” People coming into DSA have varying levels of experience with theory and organizing. Some of us have been lucky enough to spend years memorizing *Rules for Radicals* or writing a thesis unleashing a devastating critique of Lenin’s thought. Many others have not had such a luxury. An organization that treats all as equal regardless of familiarity with doctrine, dogma, or skills needs an education program capable of attracting and integrating different backgrounds.

We call our program “approachable” because our goal is to bring together these different groups. We designed our course with the assumption that all who come would minimally have an interest in learning more about the Left, but we presuppose no specific knowledge, not even of foundational concepts such as socialism, democracy, or capitalism. Despite this fact, the Night School is not designed as a pure introduction. While our sessions often start by establishing working definitions of baseline terms, discussions are designed to lead to deeper questions and facilitate debates that should interest even a socialist who has spent a decade reading radical theory.

Despite this concern, the Night School is still “rigorous.” Our program is rooted in the belief that all people are intelligent, motivated, and capable of serious intellectual work. We encourage people to engage with ideas that are difficult, new, and even antithetical to their core assumptions. We do not think people should be subjected to speeches or told what to think, but we do think that by putting different political perspectives in front of people and asking questions, people can assess the merits of arguments and become better at defending their beliefs.

In the end, the Night School is designed to create an alternative to an all-too-common liberal notion of “The Discourse.” While most socialists understand that the mainstream is hostile to socialism (or really, to any program that urges radical egalitarian change), the left has inherited many of its norms for thought from the Center. Leftists regularly exchange political ideas at the level of snappy takes or critiques

of form rather than content (the endless process of sifting through takes for good or bad faith). These attitudes are rooted in the ideological notion that some perspectives are beyond question and should be accepted without reflection.

In order to foster a climate of genuine debate and discussion, we reject this approach. Instead, we try to understand the ideas behind arguments and the political implications of certain premises. Past a commitment to the creative potential of human beings, no one is told what to think or what conclusions to draw. Instead, everyone is encouraged to voice their opinions, helping to create an atmosphere that is truly inquisitive, lively, and dedicated to the growth of political thought.

Course Design

Our Syllabus is “modular” in construction. It presents a sequence of topics arranged into a curriculum. You can easily choose topics that best suit the interests and needs of your chapter, highlighting not only your educational goals (e.g. an overview of Marxian theory), but also issues that align with larger organizational activities (e.g. a session on Healthcare to prepare for a Single Payer Campaign).

Our Night School covers a diversity of topics, focused around three key areas:

1. **History:** the history of the Left, from the Russian Revolution to the Trump election
2. **Theory:** theoretical approaches to socialist thought, from Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* to DSA’s “Resistance Rising”
3. **Practice:** practical concerns of contemporary Left activity, from M4A to BDS

In developing our Night School, we wanted to strike a balance between these three areas. It is tempting to respond to a sense of intellectual priority (e.g. a belief that reading Marx is necessary for socialists) or urgency (e.g. the need to get people to show up for local campaigns). We avoid this narrow focus. Our syllabus includes texts with deep theoretical significance, such as Marxian economics and Feminist social reproduction theory, as well as topics linked to our campaigns (e.g. a session on Medicare for All) and branches (e.g. a session on Labor being led by members of our Labor Branch).

The Night School is intended to link up these aspects of socialist activity, which are typically regarded as separate. We reject a common tendency to prioritize current events or separate theory from “the work.” There are no practical programs which are not conditioned by ideological assumptions, and our political choices construct and redefine our ideas.

In this spirit, the Night School might include not only canonic thinkers (e.g. Rosa Luxemburg, CLR James), but also contemporary public intellectuals (e.g. Noam Chomsky, Adolph Reed), recent writing (e.g. *The New Jim Crow*, the *Jacobin* prison abolition debate), and the broad range of platforms where contemporary left thought appears (e.g. *In These Times* and *Viewpoint* as well as left publishers such as Verso and Haymarket). Our goal is not only to teach people about the content of books, but also to help people navigate the many formats and institutions that structure left discourse.

Covering all of these issues would create a rather daunting list of topics, taking up decades of Night Schools. When creating our Night School, we asked ourselves about the most important intellectual tools that any Night School attendee might leave with and use. This led us to do a careful evaluation of foundational ideas, central debates, and crucial political histories. Many people in the Philadelphia chapter were working on programs like Medicare for All, constantly trying to figure out how to strategically plan and refine organizing work. The Night School was a chance to step back and ask about common points of contention when considering an organizing task or strategy.

Many of our sessions—e.g. What is Social Democracy?; The Labor Movement; State Power & Class Interests; and Left Parties—create a background for the practical questions Medicare for All organizers are wrestling with. What are the benefits and limits of pursuing social democratic reforms? How can socialists think about and relate to the labor movement and union power? How should socialists understand the state and the ways in which we are able or unable to change it? How can the left inject its vision into political parties? While each session can produce a standalone discussion, cumulatively the Night School was designed to teach socialists how to think and interrogate political ideology, creating a base greater than the sum of its individual components.

Session Design

Many discussion-based reading groups proceed without any clear structure. That approach sometimes works well, especially in a graduate school seminar or similar

meeting space where participants will show up familiar with basic discussion etiquette and endless confidence in the force of their opinions. Even in such contexts, discussions can be without direction or uninviting for less experienced participants. In the Philly Night School, we do not just show up and shoot from the hip, but put effort into designing each of our sessions.

This work is not difficult or overly time consuming, but does require some planning. We recommend thinking about goals for each session and what sorts of conversations a reading might generate. For example, when planning a session on the Russian Revolution, one might want to do a number of different things. There are historical details that are of interest (the “what actually happened” stuff!); there are all sorts of debates about the successes and failings of the Soviet Union; and there are many questions about continued relevance of the Bolshevik’s model for contemporary leftist organizing. A well designed session can tackle all of these issues in different ways, fostering learning *and* critical discussion.

We accomplish broader educational goals by carefully designing each of our sessions. Free form discussion is the bread-and-butter of reading groups for a reason: simply having a group of people forces us to actually read and comprehend books we’ve always wanted to check out. But there are other ways to make discussions more productive. We recommend making use of the full toolkit of learning formats, and encourage people designing education programs to be creative in going beyond the standard discussion template.

One major thing we do is include general discussion not tied to any specific reading. This format provides an occasion to review a key term or get a sense of the background knowledge people bring to a session. For example, before talking about economics in a session on neoliberalism, it can be helpful to ask people about what they think that term means and what general associations it has. Neoliberalism is both a specific theory and a broader cultural concept, so people will link it as much to Chicago School economists as with dietary habits.

General discussion also helps make space for thinking about the big picture. In our session on Social Democracy, we had a long conversation about whether we thought the model of states like Sweden could actually inform the current Left. General topics also allow groups to have a guided and comradely debate on an issue. For example, our session on prisons ended with a discussion of whether we thought prison abolition was a viable political program. This facilitated an excellent discussion about what DSA should prioritize.

Another common educational technique we use is the lecture. Though we try to shy away from the “elbow patch professor” model of teaching, smaller talks (10-15 minutes or so) can provide helpful introductions to a topic. In a lecture, a speaker can contextualize a discussion by defining general concepts, explaining the theory behind our session design, or explore the historical context of a classic theoretical debate. One great advantage of these formats is that they can include material that otherwise won’t fit into a reading list. In a session dealing with social democracy, you may not have time to read every German intellectual of the nineteenth century. But a speaker familiar with that literature can quickly provide useful background related to theorists like Kautsky and Luxemburg as well as organizations like the German Social Democratic Party and the Second International.

One of our favorite and most successful strategies has been to use breakout groups. If your meetings attract ten or more people, these can be a crucial resource. We will often reserve a portion of the session for this purpose, using a number of facilitators to lead smaller discussions. A small group can be helpful for allowing more targeted, precise discussion (say, to review a concept that might be difficult to understand). Another great advantage of breakouts is that people who might be anxious speaking in front of a forty person group will feel more comfortable in front of five to ten people. A final advantage is that they allow for the inclusion of more facilitators, giving additional leadership experience to chapter members. (See our section on Facilitators for more about this and related issues.)

Our session on social democracy is a model of how we employed these different approaches to craft a varied discussion. Our session was intended to help members learn about “Nordic” or “Swedish” Social Democracy, a political program that has been debated regularly on the left for decades. We planned a session that would not only provide people with a historical overview of Sweden’s socialist project, but also present some of the theoretical justifications and critiques of social democracy as a leftist program. Our outline was as follows:

- 7:00 - Announcements, Introductions, Overview of Session
- 7:15 - Introductory Lecture: A History of Social Democracy
- 7:30 - Large Discussion: Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*
- 7:50 - Small Groups: Meidner, “Why the Swedish Model Failed”
- 8:20 - Large Discussion: Miliband/Liebman, “Beyond Social Democracy”
- 8:40 - Large Discussion: What Lessons Does Social Democracy Hold Today?

In this session, we began with a short intro lecture about social democracy. The talk summarized early theorists such as Kautsky and Bernstein along with the Second International, but also mentioned our core question for the session: can we use older models of social democracy as a template for contemporary politics, or do we need a new model today?

From there, we turned to Eduard Bernstein's *Evolutionary Socialism* (1899). One of the key early theories of social democracy, Bernstein argued against Marx and other socialist theorists who wanted political revolution for a socialism that would grow organically from within capitalist states.

We followed this text with Rudolph Meidner's 1993 *Socialist Register* article "Why Did the Swedish Model Fail?" This text provided a great historical overview of Sweden's social democratic program, including a discussion of why Sweden struggled to retain its socialist programs. We used breakout groups for this segment, both to change up the pace of the discussion and to help work through some of the prickly economic and historical details presented in the article.

Next, we returned to the large group to discuss Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman's "Beyond Social Democracy" (originally published in 1985 but reprinted in *Jacobin* in 2018). This text offered a critique of social democracy as a political horizon and discussed ways to overcome its model. This text ultimately allowed us to stage a final general discussion about whether we could model DSA's politics on older examples of social democracy, whether we needed more revolutionary programs, or whether a third path was required.

This session constitutes a particular example of how to use readings to guide a particular kind of discussion. In this session we examined the concept of social democracy from the perspectives of theory (Bernstein), history (Meidner), and critique (Miliband & Leibman). This approach helped us flesh out theories of social democracy, but also more generally allowed us to think about how to discuss political ideas and programs.

Because we address different kinds of topics, this strategy might not necessarily make sense for every topic. For example, a session devoted to Lenin could approach him as a theorist, using readings to understand and historicize his arguments about the state, or could regard him as a political actor, using secondary texts about him and his role in the Bolshevik party.

Another one of our more successful strategies has been to put ideologically conflicting readings side-by-side in the same session. For example, in our session on prisons, we paired Roger Lancaster's critique of prison abolition with a defense of the idea. This allowed us to work through the arguments on both sides of the debate and then delve into the things attendees found convincing about either side. The benefit to such an approach is that it makes comradely debate far more possible and likely than what typically happens online, where people often talk past each other, misunderstand rival positions, and ultimately depart from actual political considerations.

In the end, careful design can completely change the way in which a topic is framed, driving discussions in productive directions and allowing all present to consider new political considerations.

Facilitation

One of the things that often goes underprepared in discussion groups is facilitation. Some people instinctively lead effective discussions, but even experienced college professors often spend a great deal of time coming up with a plan for *how* they actually teach. In our Night School, we figure out who will facilitate each session and what facilitators will do.

Facilitation is also something that does not require elaborate preparation or training. A Night School session can be led by a single person, and though many of our facilitators have teaching experience, good planning is more important than a person's pedigree. We do recommend using as many facilitators as possible, and have found that organizers and teachers can bring experience and resources to each session.

An ideal goal is 1 facilitator for every 5-10 attendees. Using a team of facilitators has a number of advantages. Sessions led by multiple people are more varied in perspective and allow for more complicated structures like breakout groups. From a purely practical standpoint, they also minimize the preparation required of each facilitator. One person can write an introduction, another can design reading questions, a third can prepare a general discussion, and a fourth can focus on logistics.

Whether a Night School is facilitated by one person or seven, there are many different tasks that must be considered. First, the content for each session will need to be generated. Lectures will need notes and reading discussions will need questions. When preparing our sessions, we often pool questions from all of our facilitators as they

read through each text, generating a pile of resources that can be used during breakout discussions.

When planning session outlines, write clear and focused questions. Questions like “What did you think of Luxemburg?” or “can anyone quickly summarize *Capital* Vol. I” are usually the worst discussion starters. This is not because broad questions are unimportant. In fact, the big picture is a crucial part of session design. But people will usually be reluctant to tackle such grand issues from the get-go, and even if they do, the discussions that result will often be aimless. Reconstructive work—summarizing and interpreting basic arguments of a text—uses texts not only to practice reading comprehension, but also as a model of argumentation. Facilitators should think about what sort of focused questions bridge the gap between surface arguments and the deeper political questions they lead to.

If you do focused discussion of a reading, be mindful of specificity. Some attendees may not have read a text as closely as you, or may not remember every single detail. If you do want to discuss specific parts of the text, you can also allocate some time for reading a passage together as a group. Plan for a facilitator can read it, ask for a volunteer, or give everyone a minute to do so privately. Then you can ask the group what they make of the section.

Well written questions and outlines are important, but at the end of the day, all the planning in the world won’t guarantee a successful session. For this reason, it is crucial to think about in-session behavior.

The obvious major function of facilitators is to guide discussions. One simple thing that leftists often forget in planning events is to decide who will actually call on people. This leads to awkward moments where attendees do not know when it is appropriate to answer a question or who should talk first if other people want to speak. While it is not necessary to have a dedicated “caller” just to point at people when they raise their hands, someone should be clearly in charge of that duty for every segment. It is simple enough for the person asking questions to also do this task.

We don’t recommend using Progressive Stack, especially if your meetings have a small number of attendees. While this structure can be useful for guaranteeing many people have a chance to speak in large public events, it is not well-suited to small group discussion. Even so, a facilitator should be paying close attention to who is speaking and how often. A facilitator can maintain a que in their head, or might even jot down notes.

Facilitators should also be careful to strike a balance between active and passive direction. A major function of a leader is simply to make sure people feel comfortable. We discourage the use of “cold calling,” asking a random person to speak about an issue. If someone wishes to remain silent and listen for an entire session of the Night School, we see no reason to challenge them.

Also, while facilitators are there to keep discussions from wandering too far afield and to ask questions when organic conversation dies, it is important to leave freedom for people to voice their opinions or frame discussions in familiar terms. Keep a timeline, but do not end good conversations simply to save a minute or two.

Another common mistake that inexperienced teachers make is to move too quickly through discussion questions. Often, when asking a question, attendees might take a moment to think about a response, or will wait to see if others respond. Ask your question, then wait for a while. If people don’t eventually respond, ask the question again. Simply repeat yourself, reword what you said to clarify your meaning, or remind people that there isn’t always a right answer. Also, be sure to let multiple people answer the same question or respond to each other. Try not to respond to every comment made by attendees. If you must speak, you might only need to say: “Nice idea. Other thoughts?” A facilitator should speak as little as possible while still preserving an organized, focused discussion.

In this sense, facilitators should be attentive to the ways in which their own perspective informs a discussion. This is not to say that you should not voice opinions. In fact, pretending like discussions are apolitical can have a negative effect, leading to boring or reserved discussion. But the job of a facilitator is not to tell people what to believe. Be careful not to dominate discussion. Do not correct people. If you think a position might be controversial or inaccurate, ask the group what they think of an answer before weighing in.

Facilitation is important for running good sessions, but it has a second utility: bringing in new facilitators is one of the most immediate ways to help prepare members for activity outside of the discussion room. Facilitator roles are an opportunity for leadership and developing skills for external political work. By leading Night School sessions, one learns to work through and present political arguments, to frame political questions, to speak in front of others and command a room, and to develop an inclusive environment.

Depending on the way you structure your Night School, sessions can be an excellent opportunity to build leadership skills. This approach is mirrored in our general outlook. Typically those with less experience can start out leading small group breakout discussions. At first they might prefer to rely on facilitators who have more experience for questions and session structure. Over time, as they become more confident, they can be more involved in the design of sessions and even create content autonomously.

Logistics

In the end, building a Night School only requires minimal material. You will need:

- A Syllabus
- Readings; online articles, electronic files, etc.
- Promotional Materials; flyers, websites, etc.
- Facilitators
- A Venue

Once the syllabus is finished, gathering actual readings is easy. The quickest sources of materials are online websites that distribute texts for free. Publishers such as *Jacobin* present free readings covering nearly every issue of discussion on the left today, and archives such as *marxists.org* contain dozens of classic books and essays by major leftist intellectuals.

Because our goal is to balance rigor and accessibility, we do recommend adding print sources where possible. University libraries will obviously provide exhaustive source materials, but even public institutions often make available excellent texts related to all sorts of historical and political topics. Both such institutions will also typically have scanners that you can use to create digital copies of materials you will want to use.

One major thing we recommend is abridging your materials. There are more books by socialists than can be read in a lifetime, and you could easily spend a decade reading nothing but the work of Karl Marx. More importantly, short excerpts of essays can be used to achieve great educational results. Lenin was a forceful writer, but many of his most important ideas are buried in lengthy rants about now-forgotten articles published in newspapers that have been out of print for a hundred years. Pull out key arguments or ideas that suit your educational goals.

Without spending a cent, we have been able to run a yearlong education program in venues that comfortably host 30-50 attendees. In seeking out venues, there are dozens of options: campus spaces, coffee shops, public libraries, churches, community centers, and left-leaning bookstores. Some organizations have been willing to donate space out of solidarity for our mission, while other spaces simply make rooms available to the general public without regard for the use. Either way, be sure to consider the intellectual and physical costs to hosts, and respect their space and their concerns. Some venues such as churches and nonprofits may not want to endorse DSA's political program, but will still be glad to donate space to community members.

Once you have a session designed, be sure to promote it actively. Start announcing events early so that people have time to arrange their schedules. To get the word out, circulate flyers, make a website, and use social media. Flyers can be easily designed using a program such as Acrobat Pro or Pages, which is free for Apple users. (We have included templates in .pdf and .pages format that can be easily modified.)

Our Night School also has a dedicated section on our chapter homepage, where we post reading links and other logistical details. We promote our program regularly via DSA channels such as our official Facebook and Twitter accounts. We have also created a listserv to notify members about events. We pass around a laptop for electronic sign-ins, and use that to create a member list.

Sample Discussion Questions

By Jarek Ervin

Used on January 30, 2018

For our “What Actually is Neoliberalism?” Session

Reading List:

- Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*
- Frank, *Listen Liberal*

Session Schedule:

7:00 - Announcements, Introductions, Overview of Session

7:15 - Introductory Lecture: “What Does the Word Neoliberalism Actually Mean?”

7:30 - Large Discussion: Neoliberalism in Theory

7:50 - Small Groups: Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*

8:20 - Large Discussion: Frank, *Listen Liberal*

8:40 - Large Discussion: Can We Defeat Neoliberalism?

Large Discussion: Neoliberalism in Theory

1. *What is neoliberalism as an economic theory?*

Possible Quotation to Use:

“A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” (Harvey 2)

Follow Up: What does this passage mean?

Follow Up: What are examples of neoliberalism?

- letting a private contractor run a prison, build roads, etc.

2. *What does the word liberalism mean in this context?*

- protection of freedom of individual over collective need
- liberty (e.g. classical liberalism)

3. *How does this idea of liberalism relate to markets?*

- the idea that free markets will be guarantors of personal freedom
- e.g. Free markets promote social good, growth of society, etc. (Harvey 3)

4. *What, then, is the neo- aspect of neoliberalism?*

- De-regulation, Harvey's "creative destruction," etc.

Follow Up: Can you think of any examples?

- get rid of unions, privatize public schools, etc.

5. *A word sometimes used in a similar role to explain more recent economic relations is globalization. What does this term mean?*

- global society, information society, tech revolution, etc.

6. *How does neoliberalism then relate to globalization? How is globalization alternatively explained an effect of neoliberalism?*

- -Neoliberalism fills in the political-economy
- it isn't just cultural exchange
 - e.g. "Xbox Live makes it easier to talk to people who are far away"
- it's also about financial exchange!
- Minimize national borders and remove obstacles to trade!

Small Groups: Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*

1. *Zooming in a bit more on the book's argument: H. suggests there is a tension between the state and the market. What should the function of the state be for neoliberals?*

Possible Quotation to Use:

The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private

property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets.

Follow Up: How does this differ from other conceptions of the state?

- A State provides for its people, regulates minimum standards of quality, promotes civilizational uplift
- This contrasts to New Deal, state socialisms, etc.

Follow Up: What is Harvey's idea of "Embedded Liberalism"?

Possible Quotation to Use:

"What all of these various state forms had in common was an acceptance that the state should focus on full employment, economic growth, and the welfare of its citizens, and that state power should be freely deployed, alongside of or, if necessary, intervening in or even substituting for market processes to achieve these ends. Fiscal and monetary policies usually dubbed 'Keynesian' were widely deployed to dampen business cycles and to ensure reasonably full employment." (Harvey 10)

9. What are some of the practical effects of Neoliberal theory?

- emphatic turn toward deregulation
- not only in US, UK, but even in Post-Socialist States (e.g. China)

Follow Up: What about Harvey's historic/political examples?

- Chilean Coup
- Iraq War

Group Discussion: Frank, *Listen Liberal*

1. Before we get into the text, can anyone provide a quick gloss on the Global Financial Crisis?

- 2007-2008, Worst financial crisis since Great Depression
- Mortgage Crisis
- Banking Crisis
- Etc.

2. Getting into the text: Why did some people think Obama was a step forward over Bush, who many blamed for the crisis?

- Obama seemed smarter, more relatable
- Lots of cultural stuff shaped his image
- Obama had Ivy League smarts, but was a chill guy
 - sang Al Green songs, liked sports

3. Why did some commentators think Obama was reversing Bush's neoliberalism?

- Obama had a stimulus plan, which appeared to be an FDR-style "New New Deal"
- this was one of the reasons Obama was called communist
- He campaigned against NAFTA

4. Why is this view potentially misguided according to Frank? Why is the Obama regime not much different than the previous one?

- The bailouts continued
- Many personnel remained in place:
 - Fed chairman Ben Bernanke was renewed
 - Geithner moved from the NY Fed to Treasury Department
- Government became an insurer of the banking industry
- nobody was really punished or fired!

5. Why does Frank think Obama's New New Deal was weak?

- the stimulus was small
- unlike New Deal, no jobs created
- unemployment wasn't affected
- Obama also defended TPP

6. How did democrats try to deflect criticism?

- Obama couldn't act. His hands were tied.

7. What does Frank think the problem was with this logic?

- He... could have!

8. Do you buy this critique? Does it seem fair?

9. How do you think this situation set the stage for more recent democratic party behavior?

10. In what ways might you call democrats a neoliberal party?

Sample Intro Lecture

By Dustin Guastella

Presented on February 13, 2018

For our “Class Struggle” Session

Reading List:

- Olin Wright, “A Framework of Class Analysis in the Marxist Tradition”
- Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*
- Meiksins Wood, “Why Class Struggle is Central”

Introduction

How do we understand what it means to “do” an analysis of class under capitalism? And why should democratic socialists even endeavor to do so?

So first we can start from the moral commitment. As democratic socialists we are committed to a more egalitarian society. One where each person's life-chances, their aspirations, their beliefs, and desires can be meaningfully realized absent some external and artificial constraint. But this claim fundamentally rests on that last part of that sentence. It rests on the demonstration that the “constraint” is indeed *artificial* and that we can realize a society whereby this constraint is eliminated. Now of course this itself is debatable, but what we can say is that in a society where there are around 13.9 million homeless people and 18.9 million abandoned homes there is something not simply rotten about the distribution of goods and services, but fundamentally contradictory.

If we can say confidently that under capitalism there is clearly a contradiction between a seeming abundance of available resources and the reality that the needs of most people—most of the time continue to be—unsatisfied, why then wouldn't we simply distribute the available resources to those in need? Here is where an countervailing moral claim enters the picture. Its a claim, I think, best demonstrated by Aesop's fable, “The Grasshopper and the Ant.”

Aesop's story is about a grasshopper and an ant. The ant works hard to gather food for the upcoming winter and the careless grasshopper says, “why work so hard, we live in a summer of abundance!” Of course, the ant responds “I have to save for the winter.” Winter comes and the grasshopper is poor and destitute while the ant is rich and happy. The story is meant to illustrate the basic claim of liberal politics: poverty and inequality are of course unequally distributed, *but* they are *fairly* distributed! The world is full of grasshoppers and ants. The ants are rewarded for their hard work, while the grasshoppers suffer for their laziness.

Now our task as socialists is not to demonstrate that the world is not full of grasshoppers and ants—of course it is! There are all sorts of people in our society. Instead, our task is to demonstrate that the fable omits a key explanatory factor. The reason the story works and is so powerful is because the social relation between grasshoppers and ants has nothing to do with their ultimate outcomes. Both are totally independent subjects making their own decisions about their lives. The ant does not rely on the grasshopper for wealth, and the grasshopper can't blame the ant for destitution. There is no meaningful *relationship* between grasshoppers and the ants.

Now liberals may not fully believe in the story of the grasshoppers and ants. That is they may not deny that classes exist, and maybe they don't really believe Margaret Thatcher when she says "there is no society, we are all individuals." But liberals believe in a different theory of class, what we could call a "gradational" or "distributional" theory of class. When politicians use "the middle class" to refer to basically all Americans that aren't filthy rich or desperately poor, they are relying on this understanding of class. It's a theory that essentially accepts that the class structure is somewhat unfair and of course some marginal outliers are lazy and rich or poor and work hard. But basically the differences within the ranks of our great middle-class and the differences between this class and other classes has very little to do with power, control, domination, or exploitation. Class here, for liberals, is simply a descriptor, a grouping of people based on similar income, occupation, wealth, or experience. This version of class analysis has almost no explanatory power whatsoever—it doesn't tell us why some have power and wealth and others don't. It merely describes the world. And it once again collapses into a story of grasshoppers and ants whenever we seek to answer a question like "Why is Bill Gates so rich?"

So what makes socialist class analysis different? We believe that there is something special in the *social relationship* between classes, which determines far more than any level of industriousness or simple random chances at luck. That is, we say that the industriousness of the ant—and later the reward—is not at all determined by a relationship to the lazy grasshopper. Rather, the ant's life is fundamentally determined by a relationship to the Queen of the ant colony. It is fundamentally a relationship of exploitation. A relationship that the ant has no means of determining. It is a relationship of power and a relationship of control.

For socialists, classes are not simply based on a distribution of attributes, occupations, or wealth, but on a fundamentally on relationship. So socialists talk about "capitalists and workers," "slaves and slaveowners," and "serfs and lords." These categories themselves *imply* a relationship between classes. A capitalist is a capitalist *by virtue of* their relationship to the worker. Similarly, you cannot define a "slaveowner" without explaining their relationship to the slave. And these relationships are not simply definitional, they *determine* the classes themselves. Absent the relationship, the classes cease to exist. You cannot have lords without serfs or capitalists without workers. This is very different from the way liberals talk about class, the only relationship the phrase "middle class" implies is that the class is somewhere in the middle of other classes...

So okay. If the relation is central to a socialist class analysis, what is the nature of this relationship? Is it harmonious? Is it mutually beneficial? Is it a tenuous or fleeting relationship? Can it be easily transformed?

Each of the authors we read today understand class as a relationship of a specific kind. They claim class relationships are relationships of *exploitation* and *domination*. And each claim that this understanding of class is the best way for explaining the world as we see it.

Domination is pretty simple. It refers to the capacity of one group or individual to make another group or individual do something they otherwise would not do. And domination is obviously objectionable for all sorts of good moral reasons, not least of which is that political domination on a high order dramatically limits the needs, aspirations, and desires of the dominated. Now some of the most left-wing liberals would agree. They might say “yes, domination matters and the tragedy of a class system is that the rich politically dominate the poor.” This is indeed a tragedy, but it's only half of the equation.

Domination absent exploitation is not necessarily indicative of a class relationship. Consider: a parent dominates their child when they force them to wear a seatbelt, but it would be absurd to claim by virtue of this domination that the parent-child relationship is a class relationship. Most parents typically do not extract something from their children that improves their own welfare; in fact, for most parents in the United States, children are a net drain on their resources. So what then makes up this thing called “exploitation”?

Exploitation is a much trickier concept to define. To say that a group or individual *exploits* another is to say more than a group suffers while another benefits. It is to claim that the suffering is causally linked to the benefits. That poverty and deprivation of the exploited is linked to the welfare of their exploiters. But why is this exploitation and not simply domination? If we return to the parent child relationship we recognize that the parent and child are not bound together by a relation of exploitation. The parents do not *need* to exploit their children for their welfare, nor do children need to be exploited for theirs. This is not so for classes. Absent workers, capitalists cease to have a means to exploit a profit and absent capitalists workers cease to have an exploiter.

Consider, the old slogan “the boss needs you but you don’t need him.” This perfectly captures the relationship of exploitation. Bosses must have workers, and are incentivized by their own welfare to pay them poorly and treat them poorly; to do otherwise is irrational. Profits come from doing exactly these actions. Lower wages means lower expenses means greater profits; fewer break times means more working time means more profits. Bosses are dependent on dominating *and* exploiting the labor of workers. Absent these two features the relationship falls apart.

So it's the presence of *both* domination and exploitation that makes class so unique a concept for socialists. Any group can be dominated. In order for a group to be considered a class, it must be dominated and exploited, or conversely, it must dominate and exploit.

Hopefully I have demonstrated why this relationship is so unique. What I would like to do now is explain what the consequences of this relationship are. If capitalists depend on the exploitation and domination of workers, we can see how it is in their common, or class, interest to maintain this relationship. And given that they have greater power, as demonstrated by their ability to dominate, and that they have outsized resources, through their ability to exploit, we can see how class relations structure the very boundaries and possibilities of political change under capitalism.

Not only do capitalists profit off of exploiting us, they also dominate us politically to ensure their continued welfare. The only way out of this relationship is a collective strategy to end the system of political and social domination *as well as* the system of economic exploitation.

If we return to the questions I asked originally: what exactly is the promise of class analysis? Class analysis helps us identify which side of the fence we are on, and who has the collective power to tear down that fence in order to raise up a society where each individual is free to pursue their own unique aspirations, desires, and goals absent system of domination and exploitation.

Philadelphia Democratic Socialists of America



socialist night school

...an approachable but rigorous series of ideological discussions.

Tuesdays 7:00 pm (Biweekly)

Houston Hall, UPenn

**3417 Spruce Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104**

www.phillydsa.com

In recent years, socialism has reemerged as a central framework in discussions of the ongoing political, economic, and social crises facing Americans. DSA has quadrupled in size since 2015, its ranks swelling with activists interested in building a better world.

With this growth comes an expanding need for education detached from the dominant for-profit model and rooted in the political struggles of working people. Philly DSA is launching a Night School to help reinvigorate a climate of political discussion, comradely debate, and shared understanding.

Along the way, we'll discuss:

- Key concepts in political theory (domestic labor, imperialism, neoliberalism, etc.)
- Central figures on the left, from Marx and Luxemburg to Corbyn and Bernie
- The role of socialism in struggles for racial justice, healthcare, labor rights, and education

Whether you're curious about socialist theory, a longtime activist, or an expert Marxologist, come join us!

Syllabus

| | |
|--------------|---------------------------------|
| July 13: | What Is Democratic Socialism? |
| July 25: | Marxism 101 |
| August 15: | Red October |
| August 29: | Lenin's Revolution |
| October 3: | The Prison State |
| October 17: | Race & Class |
| October 31: | The Academic-Industrial Complex |
| November 14: | Imperialism |
| November 28: | Israel-Palestine |
| December 12: | The End of Nature? |
| January 16: | Marxism 202 |
| January 30: | What Actually is Neoliberalism? |
| February 13: | Class Struggle |
| February 27: | Gender & Capitalism |
| March 13: | What is Social Democracy? |
| March 27: | The Labor Movement |
| April 10: | State Power & Class Interest |
| April 24: | Left Parties |
| May 8: | The Commodification of Care |

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Imperialism

From the first moment Columbus set sail in the direction of the “New World” to the ongoing conflicts raging in the oil fields of Iraq, the entire history of the capitalist epoch has been defined by imperialist activity.

Though often associated with Europe’s industrial revolution, it could be argued that capitalism would never have developed without imperialism. Marx himself wrote that capitalism “compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production... In one word, it creates a world after its own image.”

With readings focusing on early colonialism, US imperialism during the twentieth century, and the ongoing War on Terror, this session explores the complicated political circumstances of imperialist conflict. Join Philly DSA to discuss the complicated legacy of past and continuing imperialist ventures.

Tuesday, November 14

7:00 PM

Rad Dish Coop Cafe

1301 Cecil B. Moore Ave.

Reading List:

Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*

Blum, *Killing Hope*

Chibber, "American Imperialism & the US Establishment"

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Session Title

Session Description In This Column

Date/Time

Address 1

Address 2

Address 3

Reading List:

Author, Title

Author, Title

Author, Title

Contact:

Name/email address/website

A DSA Night School

By Jarek Ervin and Melissa Naschek

Philadelphia DSA is piloting a political education series called The Socialist Night School. Despite the name, the program is not a “school” in the traditional sense: there are no fees, grades, or enrollments, and anyone can attend as many or as few sessions as they like.

The Night School is a comprehensive reading group based on the assumption that all people are intelligent, motivated, and deserve access to quality education. In an era of privatization and austerity, colleges and universities have largely defaulted on their promises to teach. Further, students are often presented with cartoonish misrepresentations of radical thinkers, intended to reinforce the notion that capitalism forms an inevitable and permanent horizon. In the spirit of democratic socialism, the Night School aims to make knowledge and education available to all.

The Night School is similar in design to a conventional reading group (see “How to Run a Socialist Reading Group,” *Democratic Left*, Spring 2016). However, we wanted a more comprehensive scope, so we crafted a “syllabus” that would be interesting to new and veteran activists alike.

The syllabus is based around three key areas of study: political theory, history, and practical issues. We believe that the only way to understand our current political situation is to bridge the artificial gap between theoretical representations of the world and the struggles that define our political system. Night School sessions cover topics from Marxist theory and the Russian Revolution to gender, environmental destruction, and Medicare For All.

The night school offers a space for members to engage in contentious but comradely debate about a range of issues. One of our recent sessions was titled “The Prison State.” We began with the introduction to Marie Gottschalk’s excellent book *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics*. This text allowed us to pose important theoretical questions: What are prisons, Why do they exist, How do they affect the working class? We then turned to two articles about prison abolition, both recently published in *Jacobin*. The question of how

to respond to prisons isn’t just theoretical: it’s an actual debate within DSA. This session ultimately allowed us to engage a timely issue in a rigorous fashion and to allow our membership to decide for themselves about an issue that may shape the very priorities of DSA.

A Night School is easy to build. There are excellent leftist resources on the web if you don’t have

access to a good library, including Marxists.org, *Jacobin*, and the Online University of the Left. Many libraries will also order multiple copies of a text for a reading group. Once you have a topic, you need facilitators, a venue, and a program such as Word or Pages to make handouts and flyers.


Our sessions meet bimonthly from 7:00-9:00 p.m. We promote sessions via the Philadelphia DSA website, social media accounts (Twitter and Facebook), and our local listserv. We had to find a larger venue after our first session drew 30 people to a room that held half as many, and our more recent sessions have attracted crowds of up

to 50. We’ve relied on free options and have found space in coffee shops, campus venues, and churches. Participants range from longtime members to people who are attending their first DSA event. Although the syllabus was designed to be cumulative, each session is self-contained enough that anyone can jump in or out at any time. New attendees come to each session.

Many of our facilitators are experienced teachers and organizers, but good planning is just as important as formal training. During our sessions, we try to vary activities. Lectures can be effective, but large-group discussion, small-group breakout sessions, presentations, and debates are important ways to make Night School meetings less like actual school and more like forums for serious learning. ❖

Jarek Ervin is a writer, teacher, and the chair of Philadelphia DSA’s Political Education Committee. Melissa Naschek is the co-chair of Philly DSA and serves on its Political Education Committee. Copies of the syllabus are available from Philadelphia DSA at <https://phillydsa.com/night-school/>

Philadelphia Democratic Socialists of America



**socialist
night
school**

...an approachable but rigorous series of ideological discussions.

The Prison State

Tuesday, October 3
7:00 PM
Rad Dish Coop Cafe
1301 Cecil B. Moore Ave.

Reading List:
Gottschalk, “The Prison State”
Berger, Kaba, & Stein, “What Abolitionists Do”
Lancaster, “How to End Mass Incarceration”

Contact:
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phillydsa.com