

## Socialists Believe in Workers Liberating Themselves

**That workers must liberate themselves rather than rely on top-down liberation is one of the few rules for socialist organizing that Marx and Engels ever laid down. It's nonnegotiable: socialists believe in workers freeing themselves through class struggle.**



Workers engaged in a sit-down strike at a Fisher auto body plant in Flint, Michigan, on January 1, 1937. (Dick Sheldon / Library of Congress)

In the last two months, thousands of American workers walked off the job, sometimes without official permission from their union leaderships. That's the big story of 2021 — not just what didn't happen in the halls of power in Washington, DC, but what happened in workplaces in Iowa and Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, Michigan, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee.

These strikes should hearten socialists. After all, a militant working class is at the heart of our theory of social change. But they should also make us think about how we can better connect the socialist movement to these kinds of working-class fights.

Today's socialist movement is still getting its sea legs. Our ideas about socialist strategy are hazy at best. Our leaders and politicians struggle to articulate a full explanation of how we get from capitalism to socialism, or even what socialism is. All of that is understandable — after decades of dormancy, we're just getting started. But if we want to link up the nascent American socialist movement with the brewing movement of the working class, we need to get our act together.

Without being dogmatic, we would do well to revisit our foundations. And two old theorists of

socialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, are the place to start. They were among the first to identify the unique interest working-class people have in socialism, and the first to recognize that workers have the potential power to win it. And they set down the principle of working-class self-emancipation that socialists should embrace today.

## Why the Working Class?

The working class is at the center of Marx and Engels's theory of socialist transformation. Workers will form the core of the movement to overcome capitalism, Marx and Engels argued, for three reasons.

First, after carefully studying the past, they observed that one class — one group of people who share a similar role in the economy — has always exploited another. The exploiter class lives off the labor of the exploited, taking from them the fruits of their work. That exploitation has led to resistance by the exploited and then, from time to time, class struggles.

The class struggles between masters and slaves shaped the ancient world, while those between lords and peasants shaped the feudal world. The struggles between capitalists (“the bourgeoisie”) and workers (“the proletariat”) similarly shape the capitalist world — and will eventually lead to its transformation. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels wrote: “Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat.”

But that only explains why Marx and Engels expected workers to come into conflict with capitalists. They also expected this conflict to move humanity forward toward a better, freer, and more humane way of organizing society.

This is the second reason Marx and Engels were confident workers would play the decisive role in social transformation. Workers, they reasoned, share similar interests, and those interests will lead them to struggles that will strengthen their own forces and transform the world for the better. Exploited by the capitalist class, workers are constantly being driven to fight back. Through conflict, they can win better working and living conditions for themselves and their families, but their victories are often precarious and unsatisfactory, and the basic fact of exploitation remains unchanged.

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In the course of their struggles, workers can come to realize that they have an interest in changing the economy itself, for everyone's benefit. (Though the realization will not happen automatically — and socialists have an important role to play in bringing it about.)

History and interests alone, though, aren't enough to change the world. Marx and Engels's third reason for believing the working class would be the ultimate agent of social change was that workers also have *potential power*. That power comes from workers' strength in numbers and their concentration and function at the heart of capitalism: the workplace. In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels wrote, “With the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more.”

As the vast majority of society, workers can potentially overwhelm the small capitalist class. And more importantly, workers can control the flow of profits. By striking or slowing down production, they can force the capitalist class — the ruling class in our society today — to negotiate. That power gives workers enormous leverage, which they can use to force capitalists to make changes in society. Eventually, they can also use their strength to throw the capitalist class out of power entirely.

In summary, Marx and Engels reasoned that workers 1) are destined to clash with society's ruling class, 2) have a compelling interest in transforming society, and 3) have the power needed to do so.

That is why Marx and Engels believed workers could change the world.

They never rejected the need for alliances, of course. They saw middle-class people — shopkeepers, intellectuals, farmers, and others — as potential allies of the workers' movement. In fact, they were quite concerned about winning sections of other classes over to socialism. But they recognized that the socialist project couldn't get anywhere without a base in the working class.

## The Principle of Self-Emancipation

Marx and Engels were not interested in elite plots or coups, as many radicals had been before them. They insisted that a transition to socialism can only be carried out by the vast majority of society, a coalition of the working class and its allies with the former playing the leading role. This was their theory of how society can emancipate itself from the domination of a ruthless capitalist class.

Marx made this point most famously in the "[Rules of the First International](#)": "The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves." It's a critically important principle, and it points to the democratic nature of the socialist project. But what did Marx really mean by the self-emancipation of the working class?

Marx's principle of working-class self-emancipation was a call for a participatory and democratic movement. The fight for socialism must involve the participation, in some form, of the vast majority of society.

That may not sound like a shocking insight to us today. But it's so important — and it's a principle that in practice most socialist movements, from the [social democrats](#) in Western Europe to authoritarian communists all over the world, have been quick to flout.

Rather than building up the leadership and participation of regular people, social democrats and authoritarian communists have all too often tried to lead exclusively from the top. They've built undemocratic parties and relied on state violence to try to transform society. In doing so, they've fallen far short of their initial objectives, and all too often have been corrupted by their power.

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An effective socialist movement must call on regular working-class people to be leaders in struggles, and it must ensure democratic control of the movement and party members. From the very beginning, that will require [building parties](#), unions, and social movements that include millions of working people and are led by workers.

If our movement is to succeed, our organizations cannot remain the preserve of middle-class activists who fight on behalf of workers but not alongside them. Not for moral reasons — if a better society could be won that way, so be it! — but for strategic reasons.

Nowhere in the world has a small middle-class movement been able to fundamentally transform a society for the better. It takes mass working-class movements to win transformational changes. Workers alone have the numbers, the interest, and the power that is needed to force ruling classes to make concessions and eventually depose them.

Bringing in millions of working-class people is no easy feat. It requires a strong commitment to democracy. That's why democratic socialists are so committed to transforming the labor movement through the [rank-and-file strategy](#) — both so we can include more people in the movement and so we can start to [democratize](#) the workplace, while in the process training a new generation of worker leaders.

It's also why we're so committed to building democratic political parties and social movements.

Training a new generation of worker leaders involves bringing many people into struggle — not just as foot-soldiers, but as strategists and decision-makers — with bosses, employers, racist cops, and the state. It's through struggle (plus debate and discussion with comrades) that people learn about the limits of capitalism and the need to go beyond it. It's how people's consciousness is shaped and developed in a socialist direction.

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Our commitment to self-emancipation also determines the kind of democratic reforms we fight for. As socialists, we're committed to transforming the state through reforms like [proportional representation](#), the public financing of elections, and [rewriting constitutions](#) — changes that empower regular people to exercise more control over the state. This commitment to democratic reform is based on the same theory that more democratic participation will only yield a greater desire for self-governance and a greater capacity to achieve it.

Eventually, we will need the vast majority of working-class people — workers in the tens of millions in the United States and in the billions globally — to be involved in the process of actually building socialism.

In a complicated and protracted transition out of capitalism, there will be hundreds of thousands of conflicts both small and large. In every city and town and in every workplace, the conflict between the capitalist class and the working class will break out into the open. It will rest on the shoulders of individual workers to occupy shop floors, lead mass demonstrations, plan strikes, capture city councils, win elections, negotiate alliances, decide on tactics, and so on.

Only a movement that is alive at the base, and that has adequately trained a generation of working-class leaders, will have the power needed to uproot the old order and build a new one on democratic lines. Nor does the process of self-emancipation end with the death of capitalism. A socialist world will be one in which everyone is empowered in some way to help shape society. In winning socialism, the working class will win the right to determine its own fate.

The principle of working-class self-emancipation is one of the few real rules for socialist organizing that Marx and Engels ever laid down. And they were insistent on it from the start. As Engels wrote in [a preface](#) to the *Communist Manifesto*: “Our notion, from the very beginning, was that ‘the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.’” Hard coding that commitment into the DNA of our movement remains an essential task.

## The Fight for Socialism

The strikes of 2021 remind us that working-class struggle is really possible. If tens of thousands of workers can risk everything by walking off the job when the labor movement is practically on its knees, imagine what's possible when we really get organized.

Ultimately, it won't be enough to win wage increases and better benefits. Those are essential demands, but the bosses and the ruling class won't let us keep them for long without a fight. They'll be back sooner rather than later demanding new cuts to contracts. We don't want to have to keep fighting these battles over and over again — and all while we live through a [climate catastrophe](#).

That's why we still need democratic socialism. We need a society where the owners and bosses have lost their power, where regular people rule in politics and the workplace, where we have the right to remake the world.

To prepare ourselves for this monumental undertaking, we need to drill down deep into questions about democracy, responsibility, and leadership. We need to flesh out our demands. We need a real

conception of what democratic socialism [might look like](#) — and what the transition to that better world might take.

But most of all, the socialist movement needs power. The strikes of last year show us where that power is already located, latent and waiting to be organized: in the working class. They remind us of what the best strategists and theorists of the socialist movement once said: “The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.” Workers will win a better world. No one else can do it.