

SOCIALISM

101

An Introduction to the Democratic
Socialists of America

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What is Socialism?

Socialism is a social and economic system in which the economy, government, and culture are democratically organized in a way that benefits all of society.

This is a broad definition. There are many ideas of how to best bring the economy under worker control. Many movements attempted or are in the process of building societies.

Socialism is perhaps best understood as a solution to a problem — and that problem is **capitalism**.



Youth at the El Rio FSA Camp for Mexican Migrant Workers

Photographed by Robert Hemmig, 1941

What is Capitalism?

Capitalism is a social and economic system in which:

- A small group of people — the **capitalist class** — owns the **means of production** (buildings, machinery, technology, patents). Since they control these vital resources, they decide who keeps the profits produced. These profits are kept for themselves.
- Workers are a necessary factor of production. Since all they own is their **labor**, which is generally replaceable, they are at a disadvantage when bargaining as individuals.
- The capitalist economy runs on the accumulation of **profits**: no economic activity will be undertaken if there's no profit in it. Even the most charitable capitalist, by the way the system is setup, must turn a profit.

- At any given wage level, it's only worthwhile for your boss to hire you because whatever you're doing is **worth more** to them than your wage.
- Therefore, under capitalism, workers are necessarily paid less than the value of what they produce — they are **exploited**.



Capitalist bosses in New York.
Photographer Unknown, 1913

Labor Exploitation

The primary injustice under capitalism is labor **exploitation**.

In chattel slavery economies, the exploitation was visible for all to see. Enslaved people were coerced to do a slaver's bidding.

Under feudalism, serfs had (limited) rights but they still worked their masters' land for a portion of each week, and handed over what they produced — the **surplus**.

Workers in capitalism also produce a surplus beyond what they need to survive — but it is appropriated by the capitalist class. This exploitation is hidden globally, in subsistence sweatshops, child labor camps, US prisons, and even unpaid labor in the home.

Exposing this exploitation, which is portrayed as voluntary, is the heart of Marxism.



Youth ironing in Tulare utility building.

Photographed by Arthur Rothstein, 1940

Labor Theory of Value

The labor theory of value is not about prices. It's about your labor in relation to the total. There's two components: embodied labor (tools, land, and resources) and living labor (the work you do with to make the finished good or service).

Embodied labor, in capitalism, is what a capitalist acquired. Some of this belonged to no one originally, but through privatization now belongs to a capitalist. Living labor is the labor workers put into their finished product or service.

Let's say the embodied labor is worth 100. Your work, living labor, is also worth 100. In this example, the total value produced is 200.

Do workers keep the full value they produce?

No. The capitalist keeps the 100 embodied labor and takes a portion of living labor's 100. The difference between what you're compensated and the remaining 100 you created is a surplus. It's profit. It's ripping off the worker of what they produced.

Through this process capitalism produces a smaller circle of wealthier capitalists with greater power over workers and other people they ripped off.



Machinist assembles plane in Tennessee.

Photographed by Alfred Palmer, 1943

Capitalism as a System of Oppression

You are part of this system whether you like it or not — you are subject to **wage slavery**, forced to sell your labor to an employer in order to survive.

Workers are at the mercy of their bosses. **There is no democracy in the workplace.** You do what your boss says or you lose your job.

Unprofitable work, no matter how necessary or socially beneficial, goes unrewarded and in many cases undone. **Without profit, capitalism has no motive.**

Seemingly separate forms of oppression — white supremacy,

colonialism, imperialism, sexism — are in fact part of capitalism's history and structure.



Tenant farmers at a Three King's Eve Party in Puerto Rico.

Photographed by Jack Delano, 1942

Capitalism as a System of Oppression

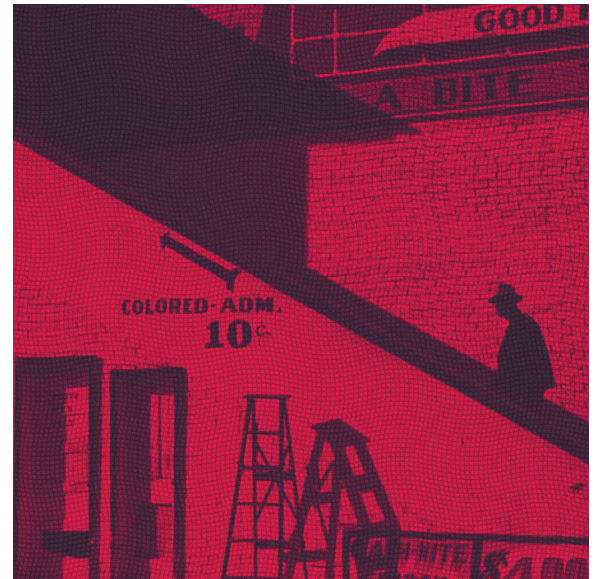
Chattel Slavery and **racism** built capitalism's rise and dominance today. Inequality can be directly traced to slaver, imperial, and/or colonial fortunes.

Settler-Colonialism is the practice of taking land and resources away from communities along with exploitation of indigenous people's bodies and labor for the benefit of a wealthy elite and specific castes of workers bribed to help exploit indigenous or local peoples.

Patriarchy and capitalism are mutually reinforcing, and capitalism arguably could not function without the unpaid and unrecognized labor of

womxn, such as housewifisation.

Slavery, racism, settler-colonialism, and patriarchy exist not as separate forms of oppression but the critical kindling burned to fuel capitalism in the United States. Abolishing these key parts of capitalism has strategic importance to all workers.



Moviegoer enters segregated theater entrance in Mississippi.

Photographed by Marion Post Wolcott, 1939

What does this mean?

Workers are alienated from their labor — they are prevented from deciding what is produced, how it's produced, or how profits are invested.

Profit is pursued above all else — anything that can be commodified will be: from the environment, to relationships, to basic human needs.

Unprofitable work is unrewarded — the commons are neglected, reproductive and emotional labor are not respected, and essential work goes undone.



Workers play games in Visalia migrant camp recreation hall.

Photographed by Arthur Rothstein, 1940

Ideology of Capitalism

More choice means more freedom; more markets mean more choices; therefore, more markets = more freedom... but having choices does not necessarily mean having the ability or resources to act on those choices

- Does the choice of fifteen healthcare plans make any difference if you can't afford medical care?
- Does the choice of six news programs make any difference if they're all owned by the same company?
- There must be more to freedom than voluntary market transactions

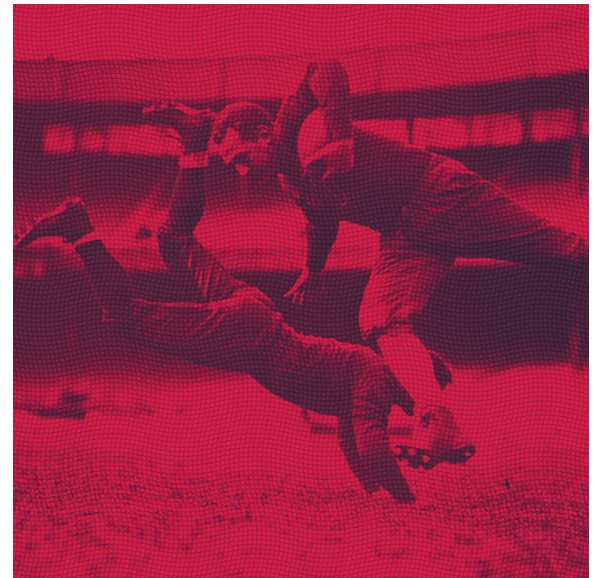
There is equal opportunity for all... ..to compete with each other

- If ten must work so that one may benefit, is it equality to sometimes

exchange who the “one” is?

Social mobility is not for everyone, it's for the lucky few who struggle to change their relative position in society. A step up the pyramid must be on the backs of others.

- Even if meritocracy truly existed, it would be a good deal only for the “winners.”



Athletes practice tackling in Chicago.

Photographed by Alan Fisher, 1935

Capitalism isn't Freedom

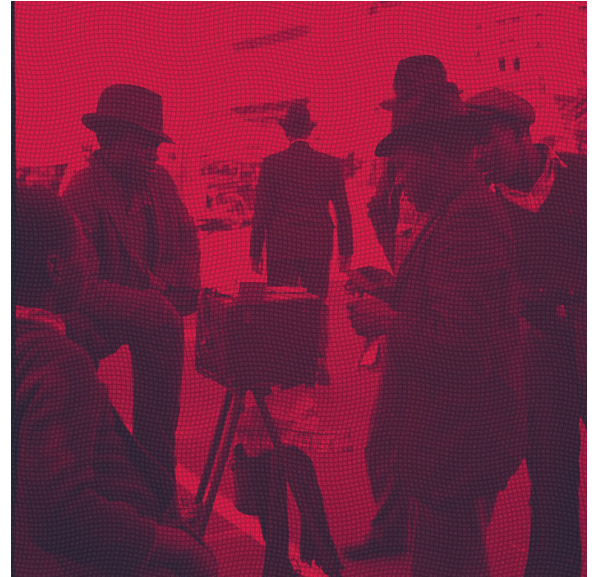
Under capitalism the vast majority of people are not free to decide:

- What they do with their time
- How they do it
- Whether it's worth doing in the first place

The greatest illusion of capitalism is the idea that it's identical with freedom; under capitalism:

- Workers are unfree; they submit themselves to the whims of capitalists, and they cannot opt out.
- Even capitalists are unfree; they cannot change the system or decide to ignore the profit motive.

And we don't know we're not free — we have come to view this system as a force of nature, not a human structure that we have the power to change.



Photographers discuss a shot in Smithfield, North Carolina.

Photographed by Arthur Rothstein, 1936

So, what is socialism?

In our view, socialism is the path to real, substantive freedom for all, not just for the rich and powerful.

Socialists seek to return the wealth of society to the people as a whole, so that we can democratically decide what to do with it.

When capital is owned and controlled by the workers themselves, the surplus that is created does not enrich a few, but benefits all of society.

By creating a democratic economy, we protect democratic government from manipulation by the capitalist class.

Socialism and democracy are not opposed, but reinforce each other; no democracy without socialism, no socialism without democracy.

Our current system is formally democratic, but we have a long way to



Latinx and indigenous workers conduct a meeting in El Rio.

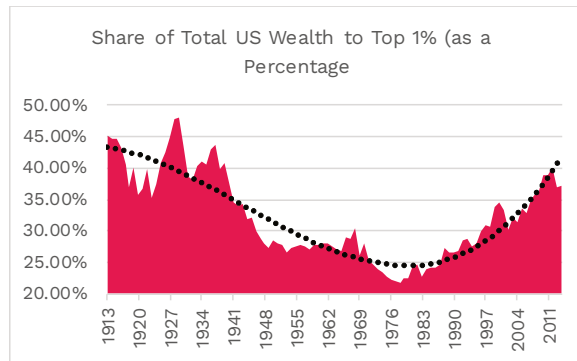
Photographed by Rober Hemmig, 1940

Why now?

As of 2018, the top 1% fiscal income share was over 22% of total incomes, something not seen since the Great Depression and Dust Bowl era.

In 1980, the largest wage growth was among the bottom 5th percentile. As of 2014, the numbers are not just reversed but peak sharply above 6% of overall growth.

As we've seen through decades of tax breaks on corporations and the wealthy, it won't trickle down. Capitalism is structured to benefit the capitalist class.



To prevent this aristocracy, we must radically confront capitalism.



Coal passers discuss a strike.

Photographer Unknown, 1911

Who owns capital?

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Scene from "Modesta" in Puerto Rico.

Division de Educacion de la Comunidad, 1956

What can we do?

The ideal solution would be to replace capitalism entirely — but the first steps would be “revolutionary reforms,” steps we can take within the system toward a more democratic economy

Reduce wealth/income inequality

Tax the rich, redistribute to the working class.

Democratize the workplace

Strengthen unions, worker ownership and management.

Democratize politics

Expand popular participation and power over government.

Eliminate the profit motive from provision of basic goods

De-commodify essential needs such as healthcare, education, food, housing.

Nationalize key industries — so that they are operated democratically, and so that their capital (and thus their profit stream) is owned by the people



Civil rights march for equal rights, integration, and housing.

Photographed by Warren Leffler, 1963

What can DSA / YDSA do?

Direct Action

It's not enough to talk about it; we must be about it. Direct action to hold bosses and landlords accountable for exploiting the people.

Strengthen the labor movement

Join pickets, salt and organize workplaces, fight for workers' rights and union power.

Mutual Aid

Assisting fellow workers is not charity; it's survival. For the people to trust each other again and to overthrow racism, sexism, transphobia, religious bigotry, and capitalism, it'll take the working class showing up for one another.

Political Education

Whether agitating the people to demand better or expanding our shared consciousness of what's possible as a society.

Influence policy

Raise awareness about the public appetite for policies like Medicare for All, and advocate for revolutionary reforms like Public Banking

Strengthen the labor movement

Join pickets, salt and organize workplaces, fight for workers' rights and union power

Elect socialists to public office

from city councils and school boards all the way to national office

Reclaim the left side of the American political spectrum

"Progressivism" is meaningless if it cannot confront root causes, and socialism is no longer a dirty word



Seattle Democratic
Socialists of America

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