

# Democratic Socialists of America campaigns for union-backed ‘PRO Act’

**Genevieve Leigh**  
9 March 2021

In February, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) announced the results of the National Political Committee’s vote on the organization’s priorities for the next three months. “As our top external priority,” the statement declares, “DSA will embark on a national campaign to pass the Protecting the Right to Organize Act (PRO Act).”

The statement characterizes the PRO Act as “transformative legislation” that “gives power to unions to organize workers.” The statement is framed entirely around the claim that the passage of the bill would be a historic win for “workers of color” and for immigrants. In a video statement released last week, the DSA goes a step further, claiming that this miracle bill is also the key to solving climate change.

In fact, the PRO Act was crafted by Democrats on the House Education and Labor Committee to bolster union bureaucracies that facilitate the suppression of working-class struggles. The bill was first rolled out in 2019 and immediately gained 100 Democratic Party co-sponsors in the House and 40 in the Senate. It was then featured in Biden’s campaign platform. Since its reintroduction to the House of Representatives this February, the number of cosponsors has risen to 209, including three Republicans.

The central purpose of the bill is to prop up the trade unions, which have lost millions of members over the last four decades due to the collaboration of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy with the government–corporate assault on workers’ jobs and living standards. The aim is to undercut the development of workers’ struggles independent of and outside the framework of the pro-capitalist, nationalist trade unions.

## From the Wagner Act to the PRO Act

To understand the purpose of the PRO Act, it is necessary to place it in its historical context. The act consists of a series of amendments to the National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act), which was passed in 1935 and signed into law by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The Wagner Act was passed under conditions of explosive class struggle in the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and only 18 years after the Russian Revolution, which had a powerful impetus on the growth of the class struggle internationally. Just a year before the passage of the Wagner Act, in 1934, general strikes erupted in three major cities—San Francisco, Toledo and Minneapolis.

A faction of the ruling class, of which Roosevelt was a part, saw a regulated and pro-capitalist labor movement, along with the “New Deal” social reform measures, as critical to containing the threat of social revolution. In particular, the Wagner Act, which established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), was aimed at controlling the strike wave and directing it into a legal framework that could be regulated and

controlled.

Just over a decade after the Wagner Act was passed, in 1947, Democratic Party politicians united with Republicans to impose the Taft-Hartley Act, an amendment to the Wagner Act. The bill, passed just after the end of World War Two and the massive postwar strike wave, explicitly banned wildcat, political and solidarity strikes (secondary boycotts), and included an anti-communist loyalty oath. It also gave the president the right to outlaw strikes he declared a threat to “national security.” The same year Taft-Hartley was passed, President Harry S. Truman, a Democrat, invoked it against American workers a dozen times.

With the emergence of the Cold War, the unions embraced the anti-communist crusade of American imperialism and carried out a purge of left-wing and socialist elements. This was solidified in the unification of the AFL and CIO in 1955.

During the first decades following the Second World War, however, the unions remained a focus of the militant resistance of workers to the encroachments of big business. The years between 1969 and 1975 saw an enormous upsurge in working class militancy, including among coal miners, postal workers, steel workers, auto workers, teachers, and other sections of the working class. Even then, many of the most significant struggles took the form of a rebellion against the pro-capitalist union apparatus. In the spring of 1970, 210,000 postal workers launched a wildcat strike, at the time the largest walkout ever against the federal government.

In 1977–1978, coal miners entered into a 111-day nationwide strike. President Carter, a Democrat, attempted to impose a Taft-Hartley back-to-work order on the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). The miners ignored the order and remained on strike.

As the global hegemonic position of the US began to falter, the ruling elite shifted from a policy of limited social reform to social counter-revolution, utilizing the methods of plant closures, union-busting and labor frame-ups. In 1981, the Republican Reagan carried out a plan worked out by the Democrat Carter and brutally smashed the strike by 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in 1981.

PATCO also was a nodal point in the degeneration of the unions. The struggle by the PATCO workers was isolated and betrayed by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which refused to mobilize its millions of members in a broader struggle despite persistent calls among workers for a general strike. The unions proceeded to isolate, suppress and defeat a series of struggles during the 1980s while integrating themselves ever more directly into the framework of corporate management.

Throughout the 1980s, the unions ever more openly adopted the policy of “corporatism,” based on the supposed identity of the interests of management and labor through the integration of the governments with the corporations and the unions, based on defense of capitalism and the nation-state.

By 1995, the portion of American workers in unions had fallen to 13

percent overall and 10.4 in the private sector, a staggering decline compared to 1958, when a third of all American workers were unionized. Strikes, which had once been a common feature of American life, virtually disappeared. In 1995, there were only 34 work stoppages involving 1,000 workers or more in the US, compared to 187 in 1980 and 424 in 1974.

Since the late 1970s, wages for the bottom 70 percent of earners have been essentially stagnant, while CEO pay has increased 10-fold. Had the income distribution remained what it was during the period from 1945 to 1975, American workers in the bottom 90 percent would have received additional income of \$2.5 trillion in 2018. The top 1 percent's share of total income has risen from 9 percent in 1975 to 22 percent in 2018, while the bottom 90 percent have seen their share fall from 67 percent to 50 percent.

### **Key provisions of the PRO Act**

It is in this framework that one must understand the effort of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party to bolster the unions and cement them even more directly to the state and global operations of US imperialism. The organizations they are attempting to shore up are not workers' organizations, but arms of corporate management. They are not instruments for class struggle, but instruments for the suppression of class struggle.

It should first of all be stated that the PRO Act is not going to pass Congress in its present form. Republicans (who generally favor dispensing with the unions altogether) remain opposed to the measure, and the Democrats would require 60 votes in the Senate to overcome procedural hurdles.

Several items have been thrown in to give the bill the appearance of protecting workers engaged in militant struggles. It would, for example, overturn the Taft-Hartley Act's ban on secondary boycotts—i.e., solidarity strikes—and prevent employers from permanently replacing strikers. If anything does end up being enacted, however, it will be those elements of the bill that are aimed at strengthening the role of the unions in suppressing the class struggle.

A central element of the bill is the reclassification of “contract workers”—largely made up of “gig-workers” at companies like Lyft, Uber and DoorDash—as “employees.” However, the law specifically sanctions the category of “independent contractor” and redefines workers as “employees” only for the purpose of unionizing them.

Employers will still be able to cheat these workers out of unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, Social Security and other benefits. They will be free to impose various out-of-pocket costs on their “employees” and fire them at will. While the workers were relegated to a form of industrial servitude, the unions would be in a better position to “organize” them, that is to extract union dues while functioning essentially as cheap labor contractors.

The bill would circumvent “right to work” laws by enabling employers and unions to establish “fair share” clauses, which would force all workers, including those who opt out of union membership, to pay dues to cover the “cost of representation, collective bargaining, contract enforcement, and related expenditures.”

This would pad the already bloated salaries of the union executives. In 2020, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) collected \$185 million in dues and spent zero on strike benefits. On the other hand, it lavished nearly \$100 million on salaries, benefits and other expenses for the union bureaucrats, including \$435,453 in salary and disbursements for AFT President Randi Weingarten.

Several measures are designed to facilitate the unionization of

workplaces. The bill would streamline the union recognition process, eliminating the balloting of employees in favor of “card check” certification. The unions would only need to get 51 percent of workers to sign cards in favor of a union to gain recognition. At the same time, employers would be required to provide unions seeking bargaining rights with their employees' information, including jobs, shift information, cell phone numbers and home addresses. It would make required attendance at an employer's anti-unionization campaign meetings an unfair labor practice.

The bill seeks to tie up workers in the debilitating straitjacket of labor-management laws, designed to suppress rank-and-file militancy. For example, if an employer refuses to agree to a first contract after unionization, the issue will immediately be sent to the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, and then to an arbitration panel that would impose a binding agreement, thereby blocking workers from striking to enforce their demands. Other disputes would be channeled to the National Labor Relations Board, which the unions have long used to preempt struggles and impose the dictates of management.

### **The Democratic Party responds to growing social unrest**

In its efforts to shore up the unions, the Democrats are responding to the efforts of workers to break free from their organizational stranglehold.

Even before the immense social crisis was vastly accelerated by the pandemic, working class militancy was on the rise. In 2018 and 2019, a wave of strikes broke out among teachers in the US and around the world against relentless austerity and the historic transfer of wealth to the rich. The strikes emerged in direct confrontation with the trade unions. In 2019, 48,000 workers at General Motors launched a 40-day strike, the first major national auto strike in the US in four decades, which pitted workers against the bought-and-paid-for corrupt gangsters in the UAW.

When the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged the world in 2020, it was acting upon an already explosive social situation. Now, a year after its onset, under conditions in which the social crisis in the US and internationally is reaching unprecedented depths, the ruling class is becoming ever more nervous that it will not be able to suppress class conflict with the usual mechanisms.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have played a leading role in the fight for independent organizations of working-class struggle, rank-and-file committees to develop a united counter-offensive of the entire working class. The Biden administration, speaking for a particular faction of the ruling class, is seeking to implement measures to strengthen union control over the working class.

This was expressed most sharply in Biden's unprecedented intervention into the vote on Amazon workers' unionization effort in Alabama last week in which he issued a video statement fully backing the efforts of the Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union (RWDSU) to unionize workers at Amazon's Bessemer, Alabama, warehouse.

The forceful intervention of Biden, a trusted representative of the ruling elite, in promoting the unionization campaign had nothing to do with the interests of Amazon workers. Rather, it expresses the concerns of a significant faction of the ruling class that is increasingly sensitive to, and fearful of, the mass radicalization of workers and young people in response to the reckless and criminal handling of the pandemic.

The second, though no less fundamental consideration of the ruling class, is bound up with its geostrategic interests.

The US ruling class is determined to maintain its global hegemonic position through the use of military force. The Biden administration is carrying out an increasingly confrontational policy toward Russia and, in

particular, China. The threat of a major military conflict is growing. In the event of a major “great power conflict,” the pro-capitalist unions will be critical in promoting national chauvinism and suppressing the class struggle. War abroad requires a disciplined “labor movement” at home.

### **What is behind the DSA campaign to pass the PRO Act?**

The campaign being whipped up by the DSA to pass the PRO Act once again underscores the organization’s complete subservience to the political needs of the Democratic Party establishment, and through it, to American capitalism.

In the face of the greatest economic, social and political crisis in the US since the Great Depression, about which the DSA has had next to nothing to say, the organization is bending over backwards to assist the Democrats in their efforts to thwart working-class resistance to their right-wing policies. The DSA seeks to corral workers into the official trade unions in order to trap workers inside organizations that have assumed the character of corporatist syndicates.

Their efforts to undermine the ability of workers to organize an industrial and political offensive against the ruling class take many forms. Virtually everything the organization writes is couched in identity politics, aimed at dividing workers along racial, gender, ethnic and national lines. The DSA National Political Committee’s statement on the organization’s priorities, which introduced the campaign around the PRO Act, began with such appeals.

The statement opens: “DSA must be a political home that attracts, retains, and supports BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) organizers.”

“This starts,” they write, “by acknowledging the pain experienced by BIPOC members caused by a white supremacy culture in our practices, recognizing the overburdened work that falls on BIPOC organizers to repair these issues, and by educating and practicing the simple fact that a socialist movement will fail without leaders of color.” In order to “serve BIPOC organizers” the DSA claims that every effort has to be made to pass the PRO Act.

In reality, the DSA leadership speaks for and is oriented to a section of the upper-middle class that is seeking positions and a “seat at the table” within the existing political framework, including within the very union bureaucracies it is seeking to bolster through the PRO Act. Indeed, DSA members are already playing prominent roles in several unions, particularly educators’ unions in major US cities.

It is on this basis that identity politics is employed so ferociously. Positions will undoubtedly be granted to DSA figures who prove their loyalty to the political establishment by policing the workers. The DSA will subsequently celebrate the diversity among the oppressors as a victory for the left.

The DSA union “strategy” has already been decisively exposed, particularly since the reemergence of working-class militancy in the US over the past several years. The DSA directly participated in the sellout of the Chicago teachers’ struggle to prevent a return to in-person learning at the start of 2021. The organization provided a cover for the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) by promoting it as a vehicle for “social justice unionism,” organized on the basis of identity politics.

Similarly, in the Hunts Point produce market strike in January, the DSA and its co-thinkers in *Jacobin* magazine effectively functioned as the press agency for the Teamsters union, promoting the illusion that the Teamsters and the Democrats were standing on the side of the workers.

Under conditions in which the coronavirus pandemic has comprehensively exposed the reality of capitalism, accelerating a broad-

based political radicalization among workers, the DSA is performing a valuable function in the service of the ruling class: providing a left gloss to the Democratic Party as it moves ever more sharply to the right.

The DSA has no interest or intention of fighting in the interests of the working class, let alone fighting for socialism. Quite the contrary, the DSA seeks to keep workers from acquiring a genuine understanding of what socialism is and how it can be achieved. However, it is exactly such a political program that is required for workers to achieve their aims. What the ruling class fears most of all is that the growing radicalization of workers will acquire a socialist leadership and political program.



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