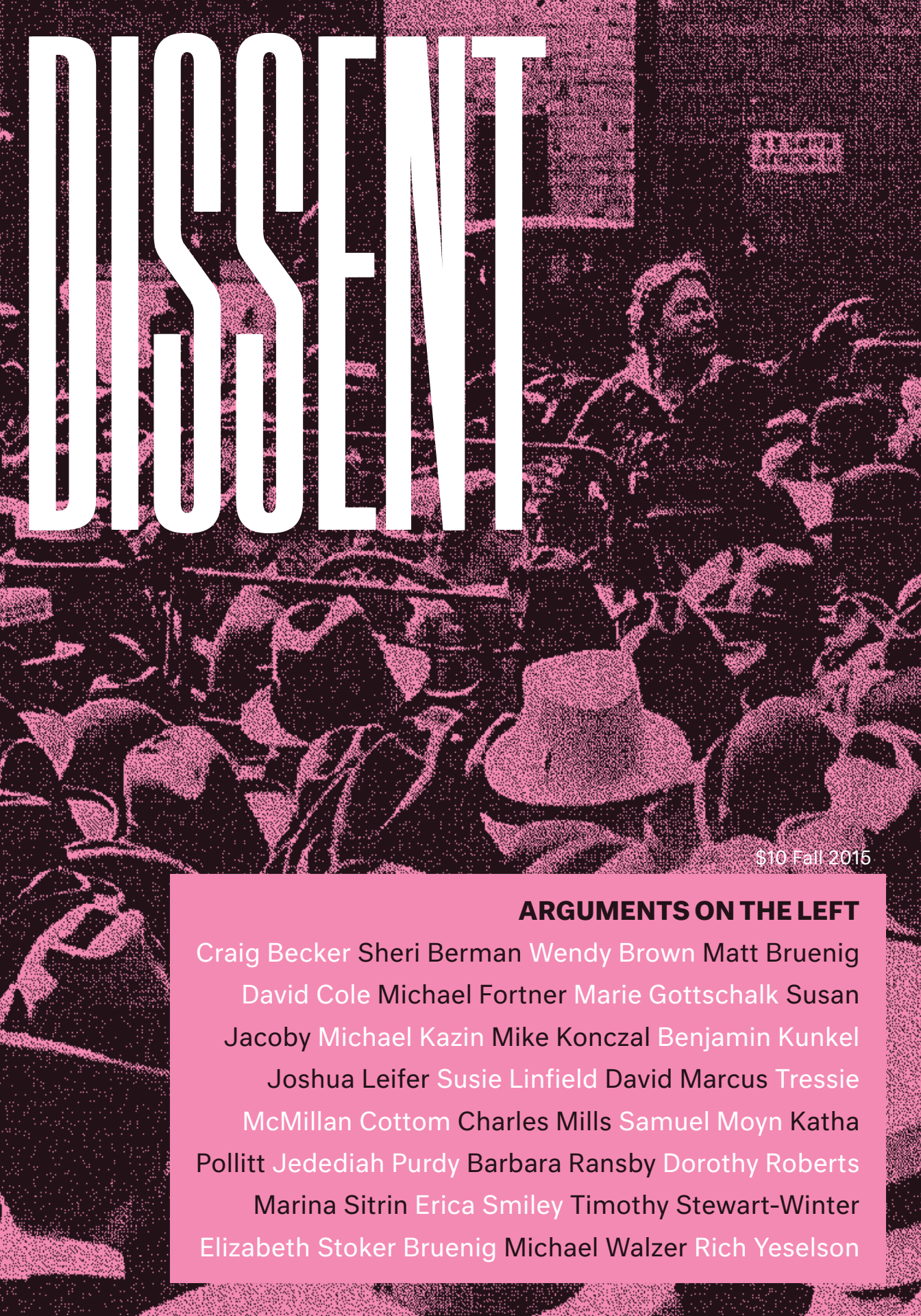


# DISSIDENT



\$10 Fall 2015

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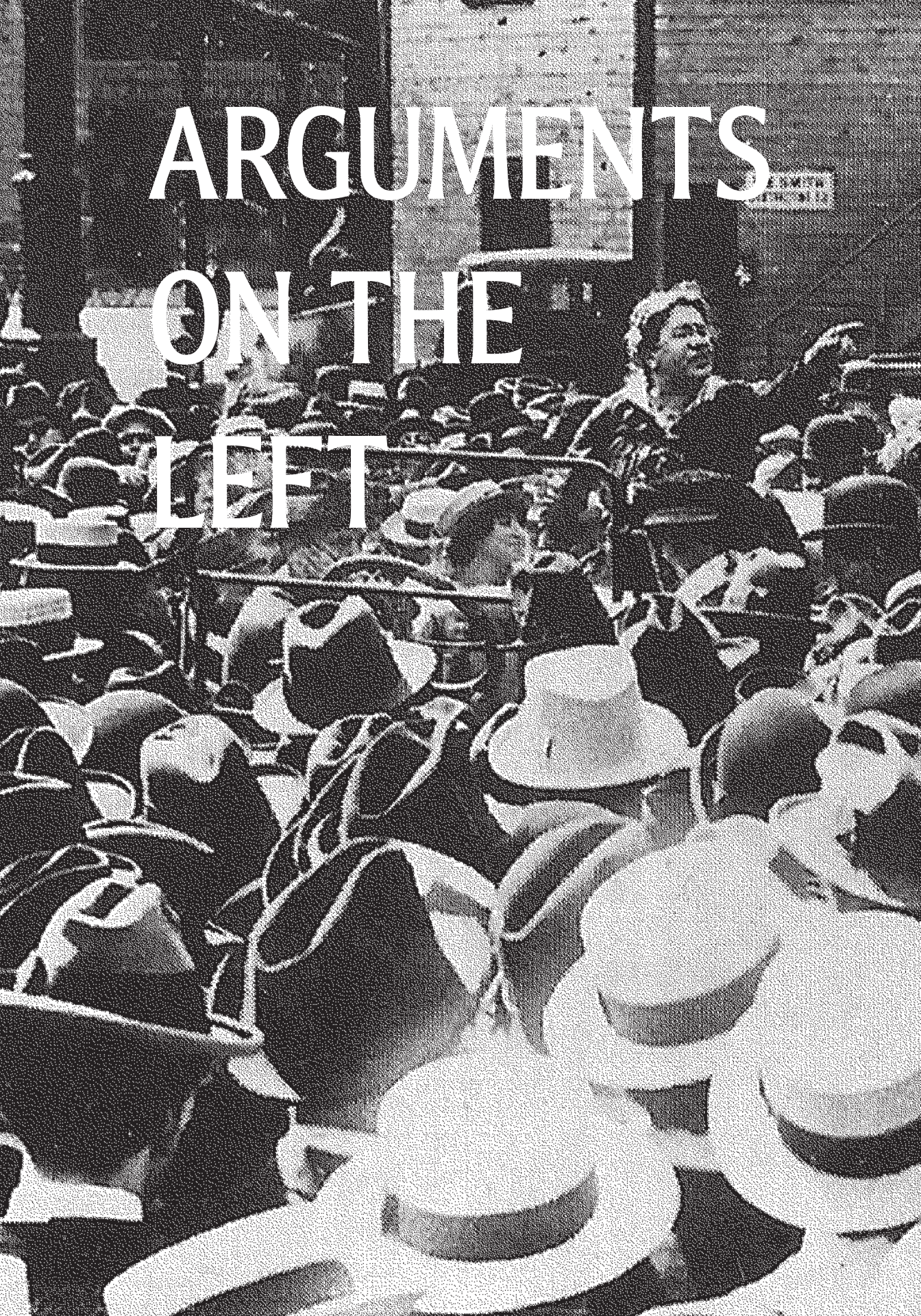
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*Cover: Emma Goldman addressing a rally at Union Square, New York, 1916.*

# ARGUMENTS ON THE LEFT



# Why Leftists Should Also Be Democrats

Michael Kazin

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**1. History:** Since the Civil War, movements on the left have won major political victories only when they were able to convince, pressure, and/or force leaders of one of the major parties to take their side on a particular issue. That most abolitionists joined the Republican Party was essential to eliminating slavery and to winning citizenship for black people. Labor unionists signed up nearly 9 million new members between 1933 and 1945 with the aid, tacit and active, of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democrats who controlled the White House, Congress, and several key state governments. Responding to the protests of the black freedom movement, the (mostly) liberal party led by John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson backed the Civil Rights, Voting Rights, and Open Housing laws of the 1960s. Then a bitter split among Democrats helped end the Vietnam War. On rare occasions, left parties such as the Socialists and Communists were able to nudge their “capitalist” counterparts to enact such reforms as unemployment compensation. But not a single radical party ever mustered enough support to enact the far-reaching changes it longed for.

**2. Social Forces:** Every contemporary group of Americans whose ends leftists support seeks to advance those goals, in part, through the Democratic Party. That includes: advocates of citizenship for undocumented immigrants, activists for civil rights, feminists, union organizers, prison reformers, and environmentalists. If you neglect the Dems—or simply denounce them—you are saying, in effect, that the carefully considered strategies of all these people who are trying to transform the nation for the better are simply mistaken. But those groups understand something left sectarians forget or never learned: politics is about assembling the social forces on your side to defeat those who oppose them. It’s what the Italian Marxist theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci called “a historic bloc” engaged in a “war of position.” In the past, the Democrats have, sometimes, been a vehicle that helped fight that conflict—most recently, for marriage equality. It would be self-defeating to ignore the possibility that it can be

used that way again.

**3. The Other Party:** It has been almost 130 years since Frederick Douglass called the Republican Party “the sheet anchor of the colored man’s political hopes and the ark of his safety.” Since Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980, the GOP has become the Grand Oppressive Party, one whose leading figures—and the billionaires who finance them—want to reverse nearly every gain that was made during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to advance the public welfare. So, for now at least, the Republicans are our enemies. It is not always true that the enemy of your enemy is your friend. From 1941 to 1945, Joseph Stalin was just a necessary ally in an unavoidable war against an even more monstrous and aggressive tyrant. But, today, any leftist who discourages people from engaging in electoral politics or wastes her vote on a third party is doing her bit, however small, to help Republicans win. In the United States, national elections (and most state and local ones too) really are a zero-sum game.

**4. Opportunities:** Yes, the Democrats are a “capitalist” party. Barack Obama could not have become president without the aid of obscenely rich people, and Hillary and Bill Clinton have cultivated the Davos set for decades. And, yes, most Democratic candidates will shift to the right on many issues if that will help them win a close election.

The point, however, is to change that. Despite having “friends” on Wall Street and among the CEOs and CIOs in Silicon Valley, the Democrats are also an institution that’s quite open to participation by individuals and groups at nearly every level—from county committees to campaign staffs to elections of delegates to the quadrennial nominating convention. That means there are plenty of opportunities to nudge, or push, the party to the left. Take the Progressive Change Campaign Committee (which, full disclosure, was co-founded by Stephanie Taylor, a history grad student at Georgetown on whose dissertation committee I serve). The PCCC promotes and helps raise donations for Democrats whose political stands it applauds: debt-free college, expanding Social Security, passing a constitutional amendment to overturn the *Citizens United* ruling, and more. The organization led the effort to persuade Elizabeth Warren to run for the U.S. Senate and currently claims almost 1 million members.

**5. No (Serious) Alternative:** It would be wonderful to belong to and vote for a party that stood unambiguously for democratic socialist principles, articulated them to diverse constituencies in fresh and thrilling ways, and had the ability to compete for every office from mayor to legislator to governor to senator to president. But not many Americans speak Norwegian.

In the United States, there are innumerable obstacles to starting and sustaining a serious new party on the left: the electoral laws work against it,

most of the media would ignore it, the expenses of building the infrastructure are prohibitive, and the constituency for such a party doesn't currently exist. A majority of Americans do say they would like to have a third party to vote for. But at least as many of those people stand on the right as on the left, and many others just despise "politics as usual" and seldom, if ever, vote. In the meantime, a tiny, existing left-wing party can run a famous individual for president who manages to win enough votes to tip a critical state to the Republican nominee. In 2000, if just *one percent* of the 97,488 Floridians who voted for Ralph Nader had, instead, chosen Al Gore, George W. Bush would have remained in Texas. And the United States would probably not have invaded Iraq in 2003. Bernie Sanders knows all this—which is why he decided to run for president as a Democrat.

For Americans on the left, whether to vote and canvass for Democrats, and perhaps run for office as one, ought not to be a matter of principle. It's a pragmatic question: can one do more to make the United States a more just and humane society and help people in other societies by working inside, as well as outside, the party, or by ignoring or denouncing it? Of course, leftists in the United States should continue to do what they have always done: stage protests, build movements, educate people, lobby politicians, and create institutions that try to improve the lives of the people whom they serve. But political parties are essential to a healthy democracy. And, right now, the Democrats are the only party we have.

*Michael Kazin is co-editor of Dissent.*

# In Praise of Amateur Politics

David Marcus

Left intellectuals often like to lament that there *once* was socialism in America—that between 1901 and the end of the First World War, a small ingathering of urban reformers, trade unionists, and German immigrants banded together to create an American counterpart to European social democracy. The apex of this movement was 1912. That year, the Socialist Party controlled seventy-nine mayoralties, published a weekly newspaper that had a national readership of over 750,000, and ran a presidential candidate who won nearly a million votes in a contested four-way race. Such was the pride and envy of European socialists that even the ever-dour August Bebel proclaimed that, at this rate, “Americans will be the first to usher in a Socialist Republic.”

Of course, we all know how the story goes. American Socialists did not usher in a new republic. Many of their ideas—state-centered economic planning, local infrastructure development, suffrage for women—were absorbed into the progressive wings of the Democratic and Republican Parties. But many others—neutrality during the First World War, the nationalization of major American industries, an antagonism toward business unionism—proved so unpopular that they became central reasons for the party’s demise.

The Socialist Party boasted a membership of well over 100,000 in the 1910s. By 1930, it was around 9,000. What once had been a broad-based movement was now a sect. Having expelled its left wing for demanding revolutionary action and its right wing for collaborating with the Democrats, the Socialists became a small cadre of the faithful. As the historian Richard Hofstadter once quipped, “Third parties are like bees: once they have stung, they die.”

Many on the left still look back to these salad days of American socialism with pride, lamenting that this was the one moment when socialism might have become as American as apple pie. But the failure of third-party

socialism was a pivotal moment for the democratic left. Having released its activists and intellectuals from the ambition of seizing state power, the collapse of the Socialist Party was not—as many contemporary leftists insist—the end of socialism in America; it was, in fact, an important beginning. It enabled the left to turn away from professional politics and direct its energies to that realm where the left has always made its gains—that of amateur politics, of everyday citizens organizing and agitating outside the party system.

This formula of citizen activism—of door-to-door canvassing and publicity campaigns, street marches and sit-ins, steering committees and late-night bull sessions—is what made possible the achievements of the abolitionists and suffragists. It was also one of the primary tactics of Marxism in its early incarnation as an extra-parliamentary movement that sought to organize the proletariat into a single international association. But it was not until the collapse of the economy in the early 1930s that the mobilization of large numbers of citizens became a truly effective force in American politics.

Faced with mass unemployment, the Popular Front and the pan-unionist CIO helped to organize millions of American men and women into extra-party political organizations that helped to push through the Social Security and National Labor Relations Acts of 1935. They also helped to build the cultural institutions—the reading groups and community centers, self-help societies and immigrant networks—that enabled Americans to not only voice their particular complaints but also build long-lasting political communities. Unlike earlier reform movements (in particular, the Progressive activism of the 1910s), the insurgencies of the 1930s and '40s came from below as well as above. They were not only the work of elected representatives but also of amateur politicians—men and women out of office—who banded together in various civil society organizations and applied pressure from outside formal institutions of power.

This model of citizen organization was repeated in the 1950s and '60s with the rise of the civil rights and antiwar movements. Originally single-issue campaigns, both eventually became broad-based social movements. The lunch counter sit-ins and boycott campaigns, the voting rights and antiwar canvassing not only helped enroll many marginalized Americans in a political system that had deliberately excluded them; it also helped the left articulate the particular complaints of its constituents in universal terms. Organized citizen bodies like the Congress of Racial Equality, SNCC, SDS, and SANE were able to both pressure politicians and shift public opinion.

The citizen left of the 1950s and '60s never entirely found a way to build a “front.” Without the economic and political emergencies of the Depression and of the Second World War, the left, in truth, was several different

lefts. This was not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, this allowed the particular demands of both the civil rights and antiwar movements to gain clarity. While Popular Front activists spent late nights worrying about the ultimate *goal* of their movement—a socialist society? A welfare state? The defeat of European fascism?—civil rights and antiwar activists had a set of specific and achievable *demands*. They wanted to end legal and political racial discrimination in the South and to de-escalate the Vietnam War. Their task, therefore, was also more obvious: to mobilize mass numbers of citizens in order to pressure elected representatives to end these particular policies.

The citizen movements of the 1950s and '60s also had a number of welcome secondary consequences. Mobilizing large numbers of young and black Americans, these movements forced the Democratic Party to rethink its platforms in an effort to better capture the support of these new constituents. They also helped to expand the realm of the possible by making a set of demands that appeared to be politically unattainable but that also helped widen the spectrum and range of debate within the party system. Daniel Bell once condemned the Socialist Party for being “*in* the world, in that it proposed reforms of society; but . . . not *of* [it], in that it refused to accept responsibility for the actions of government.” Well, this was exactly what made the citizen insurgencies of the civil rights and antiwar movements so successful. By insisting that there were political alternatives outside the purview of the two-party system, these citizen activists helped to show that what had once appeared impossible to the liberal wing of the Democratic Party—in particular, when it came to civil rights—was, in fact, achievable.

The left has tried to repeat this formula since the late 1960s but with more limited success. Gay liberation and radical feminism failed to achieve substantial gains in the 1970s, and the activism around the Equal Rights Amendment and for nuclear disarmament stalled in the '80s. But the protest and pressure tradition has nonetheless continued and is still the best option for the democratic left, especially in an era when *Citizens United* and *Speechnow.org* have made building a left-of-center coalition within the party system all the more impossible.

Today, in fact, we are witnessing an exciting uptick in citizen insurgencies, many of which have the potential to become broad-based movements. From graduate student unionism and Title IX activism to Fight for \$15 and Black Lives Matter, a centripetal force is developing. American citizens are not only directing more and more of their energies to sites of political action outside formal institutions of power; they are also helping to shift public opinion by invoking a set of commonly held American ideals and principles. Equal protection under the law, for instance, is one of the demands at the center of Black Lives Matter, as it was in the fight for marriage

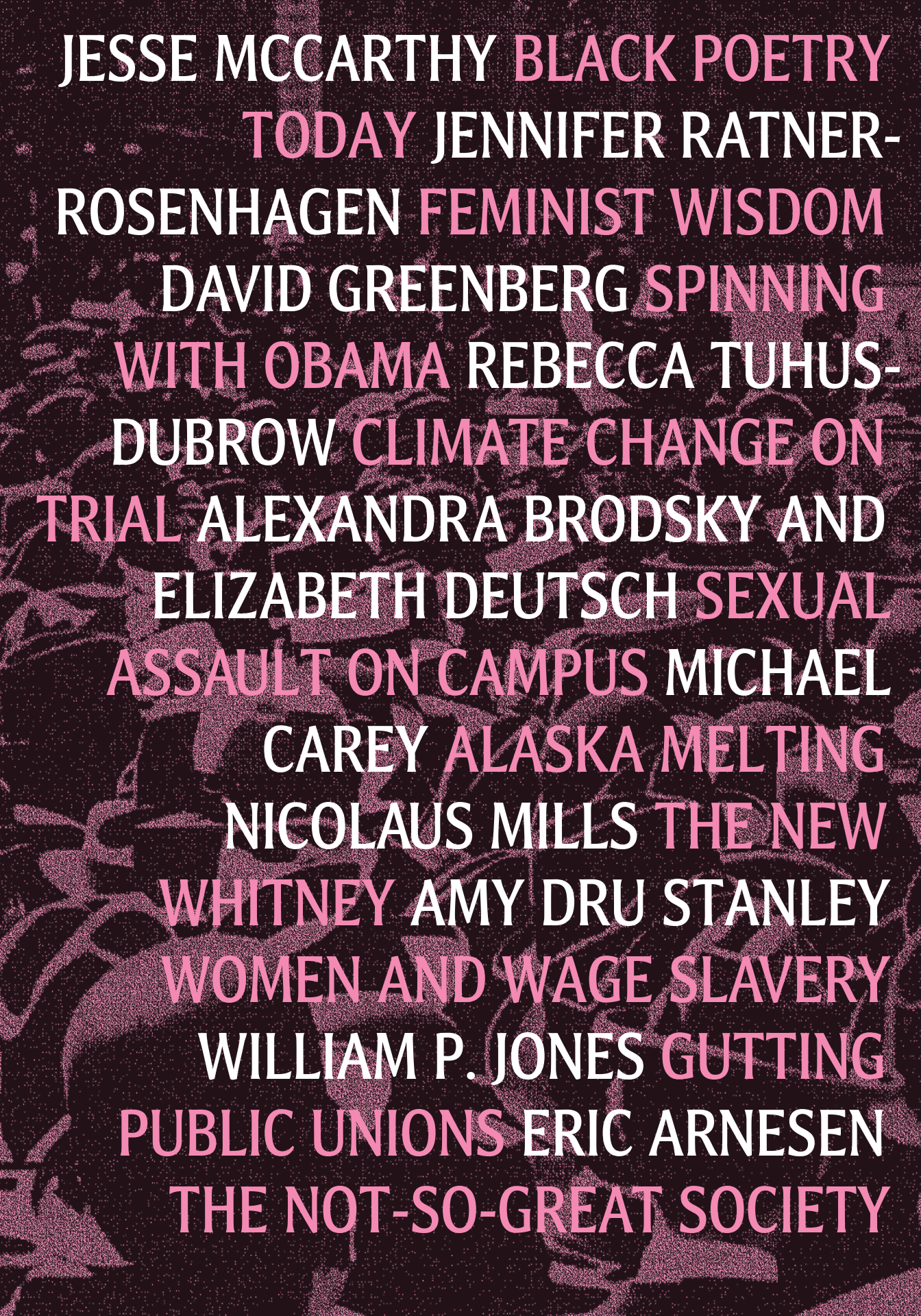
equality. Likewise, low-wage and contingent worker campaigns also appeal to the long tradition of labor radicalism by arguing that all workers, no matter their status, deserve the right to earn a fair and decent wage. While a truly intersectional movement may still lie in the future, these campaigns are succeeding, in part, because they have found ways to universalize their demands—to show how they represent an ever-growing and overlapping set of interests.

It has often been said that citizen activism alone is not enough—that real political action begins after the street marches and sit-ins. This is when the tough and necessary compromises of politics happen, the so-called “sausage making” required to turn a movement’s demands into policies and legislation. And the point is well taken. In a liberal democracy, elected representatives will almost always be the main agents of social change, and the democratic left—no matter how committed it is to a citizen politics—will never entirely be released from its obligation to engage with the Democratic Party.

But the left’s strength, and its power, will always lie outside formal politics. From the abolitionists and the suffragists to the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, our advantage has always been the result of our outsider status. By working outside formal bodies of power, we can demand what appears to be impossible to those within; our acts of organized dissent—our pressure and publicity campaigns—can insist on a set of political alternatives. Michael Harrington was right to see the democratic left as a core element of the “left wing of the possible,” those working within the Democratic Party to help elect and empower its liberal and progressive factions. But we must also remain just *left* of the possible, reminding those in power not only of what is achievable within the limits of the political system but what ought to be achievable.

This is a politics of protest and public persuasion, the work of citizen activists and amateur politicians organizing and persuading neighbors and co-workers. It will almost certainly take too many evenings, as Oscar Wilde once complained. But this is the steady work that has always been the purview of a left committed to democratic opposition. “Socialism is done from below,” a Cuban activist recently told one of our writers. Our hope is that one day it will also trickle up.

*David Marcus is co-editor of Dissent.*



JESSE MCCARTHY BLACK POETRY  
TODAY JENNIFER RATNER-  
ROSENHAGEN FEMINIST WISDOM  
DAVID GREENBERG SPINNING  
WITH OBAMA REBECCA TUHUS-  
DUBROW CLIMATE CHANGE ON  
TRIAL ALEXANDRA BRODSKY AND  
ELIZABETH DEUTSCH SEXUAL  
ASSAULT ON CAMPUS MICHAEL  
CAREY ALASKA MELTING  
NICOLAUS MILLS THE NEW  
WHITNEY AMY DRU STANLEY  
WOMEN AND WAGE SLAVERY  
WILLIAM P. JONES GUTTING  
PUBLIC UNIONS ERIC ARNESEN  
THE NOT-SO-GREAT SOCIETY