

Socialism: The Movie

Socialism is often portrayed as a foreign ideology that Americans have never embraced. But the forthcoming documentary *Socialism: An American Story* shows how deeply rooted the socialist tradition is in the US.



Still from *Socialism: An American Story*

In the space of about three years, socialism has gone from a total nonstarter to a persistent object of curiosity for millions of ordinary people, and the name of a real movement for tens of thousands of dedicated new organizers. With *Jacobin*'s support, the upcoming film [Socialism: An American Story](#) documents the new wave of socialism in the US and traces its lineage through American history.

Jacobin's Meagan Day spoke to director and producer Yael Bridge and producer [Morgan Spector](#) about the transformation they've witnessed since they started making the film several years ago, and the new possibilities that exist for socialist advance today. If you'd like to help this film become a reality — and introduce potentially millions of people to a current perspective on socialist politics — you can [donate to the Kickstarter page](#).

Meagan Day

You started thinking about this film a few years ago, when Bernie Sanders had

just shocked the nation by giving Hillary Clinton a run for her money, when the Democratic Socialists of America was on the cusp of its massive membership explosion, and before the teachers' [strike wave](#) even began.

In the process of making this film, you two have had a front-row seat to the US socialist surge. What do you make of the last three years of socialist and class-struggle politics? Is socialism really on the rise?

Yael Bridge

We've been extraordinarily fortunate to be shooting and editing during probably the most exciting time for the American left since [Debs](#). It's weird to be living through the Trump presidency — which even for those of us who think the Bush years were objectively much worse, is a horrible, humiliating time to be an American — and yet be filled with optimism, because if you're looking at the Left, you're watching the rebirth of genuinely radical American politics. So yeah, the short answer is, absolutely socialism is on the rise, not just because the distinction between the Obama era — when socialism was still an effectively toxic political slur — and today, when we have actual [self-described socialists](#) and DSA members [in elected office](#), is so sharp, but also because at least according to polls, the policies that currently comprise the demands of American socialists range from extremely popular to pretty popular [among Americans in general](#).

Morgan Spector

I think the longer answer depends on what you mean by socialism, because obviously the current demands are social-democratic rather than socialist. And [Bernie](#) has been so successful in articulating a new vision for the country that the same positions occupied by people calling themselves socialists can also be taken by someone like [Elizabeth Warren](#), who is avowedly a capitalist.

So, in that way it's a confusing time. But one thing [Eric Foner](#) said when we interviewed him, and that other people have agreed with, is that right now, Americans have the freedom to define socialism for themselves in a way that they couldn't since before the Cold War, and that freedom makes this a heady and crucial moment.

Meagan Day

There are major signs throughout society that socialism's Cold War-era stigma is waning, particularly among millennials, who according to some recent polls report overall that they prefer socialism to capitalism.

To offer a backdrop to your film, you spoke to lots of ordinary people on the street about socialism. What qualities do the people you spoke with associate with the word, and to what extent do you think people are open to the concept?

Morgan Spector

It's funny, we've done two rounds of vox pop / "man on the street" stuff about a year apart, once in New York and once in Miami. And there is some predictably reactionary hostility, but mostly people just really don't know very much. But yeah, they're open-minded. They want to know more. And again, I think that's fine. It means socialists today have an opportunity to define a socialism that's not only deeply American, and rooted in our culture and political traditions, but historically and even regionally specific.

Meagan Day

One of the major characters of your film is Oklahoma teacher Stephanie Price. Can you tell us about Stephanie's journey from pissed-off public school teacher to a member of a socialist organization?

Yael Bridge

Stephanie was a wonderful discovery for us as filmmakers — she's just a really bright, charming, courageous person. She is a person who can see that certain aspects of her life are fucked up but not really someone who has an analysis of where those pressures come from. And ultimately through participating in the strike, even though [the Oklahoma strike](#) ended in a way that was somewhat frustrating for the rank and file, she develops an entirely different sense of what she deserves, and what she can achieve.

We filmed a panel at the Socialism conference in 2018, where many of the leaders of [the strike wave](#) spoke, and the common thread was the power of that experience of solidarity. We can talk about it and write about it all we want, but I think until you actually go out and strike and find out the power that you collectively have as workers, it's hard to really grasp.

You could see that all of these people, mostly women, had kind of found their voices as people through participating in a strike. Most of them had just been rank-and-file teachers beforehand, and here they were just a few months later addressing a room of thousands with absolute poise and confidence. That's hard to do, and it was extremely moving to witness. That experience of solidarity is what Stephanie's journey in the film is all about.

Meagan Day

You also follow democratic-socialist politician [Lee Carter](#) as he navigates red-baiting and political isolation in the Virginia General Assembly. What's the arc of Lee's story in the film, and what does it tell us about how far socialist electoral politics has come and how far it has yet to go?

Yael Bridge

We've been following Lee since [the early days](#) of his first legislative session. Lee was one of the first DSA-endorsed candidates to win, even before the most recent wave that swept [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) and Rashida Tlaib into office.

He also serves at the state rather than the national level, so he has less opportunity to score symbolic political points. He has to deliver for his district or they won't reelect him.

He also was elected as a Democrat, despite having a somewhat tense relationship with the party during his campaign. So, we were curious how that relationship would evolve during his time in office. What we saw was that he proposed a whole range of bills designed to protect workers and expand workers' rights, including a bill to overturn "right to work" in Virginia, but he's been stymied not only by Republicans but by fellow Democrats.

His bills are often killed in committee. But he's optimistic, and I think that's because he feels like his fellow legislators are more open to his ideas than they were when he arrived. He's about to run for reelection, so it'll be interesting to see whether his district rewards him for fighting for them, even if not always successfully.

Meagan Day

The title of your film, "Socialism: An American Story," is meant to impress upon viewers that working-class and socialist politics are deeply embedded in our nation's history. To what extent has that history been swept under the rug, and what do we stand to gain from revisiting it?

Morgan Spector

Yeah, it's really stunning how much this history has been distorted, erased, or forgotten. One of the main ideas we try to get across is that socialism has been a vibrant part of American political life for much longer than we ordinarily imagine.

The thing that's easy to forget now that the US is this imperial superpower is how radical this country was early on when it came to thinking about democracy. People like [Abraham Lincoln](#) were willing to engage with radical thinkers. Marx wrote a column for the *New York Tribune* and [corresponded](#) with Lincoln. The labor movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that won so many rights for American workers was very much led by socialists. The [Civil Rights Movement](#) had plenty of socialist influence.

Most of the twentieth century was defined by America's war against what it called socialism, which should mean that we all understand what socialism is, but in reality means that we're only familiar with the definition of socialism that emerged from a decades-long struggle against another superpower for global dominance, which is to say socialism as totalitarianism.

The American people understood socialism entirely differently before the Cold War, and we see that happening again.

Meagan Day

As we dive into the 2020 presidential campaign, what do you make of Bernie Sanders's role in the revitalization of American socialism? To what extent did he change the game, and what promise does his next presidential campaign hold for popularizing this movement and bringing it mainstream?

Yael Bridge

Bernie's contribution in reviving this word and this movement is impossible to overstate, that should be obvious to everyone. It's not supposed to be how this works, right? Socialism isn't supposed to happen from the top down, and as you've written, ideally we'd arrive at this moment with a much stronger workers' movement already in place.

But it's astonishing that even with unions on their heels, there's this avenue of possibility in the electoral realm and that's entirely down to Bernie. With helpful assists from Republicans who have been calling everything socialism for years anyway, and Trump, whose victory seemed to prove both that the liberal center no longer had the electoral credibility that had kept the Left quiescent in election years, and that nothing is impossible anymore in American politics.

Morgan Spector

As far as this time around, it's really about continuing to define what socialism or democratic socialism means in America in 2020. If we could all be talking about the same thing, instead of endlessly rehearsing these bad faith arguments about the Soviet Union or Venezuela, that would be a huge step forward.

Another thing that I hope will become clearer is that only socialists are thinking big enough right now to actually address the problems we're facing, whether we're talking about economic and social inequality or global warming. These are problems that imply a radical break with the status quo, and that means socialists are uniquely situated for this moment.