

The Birth of the Labour Party Has Many Lessons for Socialists Today

American leftists are constantly wrestling with the question of how to relate to the Democratic Party. The history of the UK Labour Party's formation through a break with the Liberals a century ago is full of lessons for socialists today.

Ramsay MacDonald, a principal founder of the UK Labour Party and its first prime minister, is the first man on the rope at a Labour Party rally in 1923.

Bad things happen when workers lack political representation.

A major reason why the US welfare state is so meager, its union movement so frail, and its working class so divided is that the United States is the only advanced capitalist democracy where parties of big business have always monopolized the political arena. The morbid symptoms of this impasse are everywhere today, from the rise of Trumpism, to the Democratic establishment's stubborn opposition to Medicare for All in the midst of a pandemic, to the deepening polarization of national politics along [partisan lines](#) free from any focus on redistributing wealth and power.

Identifying this problem, unfortunately, has proven to be much easier than effectively overcoming it. Radicals have tried and failed over the past hundred years to make a [clean break](#) from the Democrats and Republicans by founding third parties. Yet realignment efforts to transform the Dems into a social-democratic formation have not been any more successful. In response to these setbacks, some socialists have recently [questioned](#) the goal of building a [workers' party](#) with its own ballot line.

Given how much the US Left likes to debate its relationship to the Democratic Party, it's surprising that nobody has yet drawn lessons from the international example most similar to our own: British socialist efforts a century ago to develop a political voice for working people. Britain's experience not only illustrates why workers need their own party — it shows how we might get there.

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Like the United States today, the UK had an entrenched two-party system in which the Liberal Party was politically hegemonic over workers and their organizations in the late nineteenth century. Aiming to win over the Libs' working-class base, socialists avoided the twin perils of marginalization and co-optation by organizing in and against the party, building workplace militancy, confronting establishment Liberals when possible, and allying with them when necessary.

The result was a decades-long [dirty break](#), culminating in the founding of the Labour Party in 1906 and its displacement of the Liberals as one of the UK's two main parties in 1918. Though we can't predict the exact form that such a break will take in the US context, a similar strategy is our best bet to build independent class power and to win the changes that working people so urgently need.

First Steps

As in continental Europe, working-class politics in nineteenth-century Britain [emerged](#) from within organized liberalism. While Conservatives held the support of a sizable minority of workers, most supported the [Liberal Party](#), which was popularly associated with the extension of electoral suffrage and, by the century's turn, [socioeconomic reform](#).

This situation posed a serious tactical dilemma for worker activists, because the Libs were led by “men of rank, wealth . . . belonging to what are called the upper classes,” as one [letter to the editor](#) in a labor newspaper put it, and thus couldn't be trusted to fight for the workers. For this reason, the Labour Representation League (LRL) was founded in 1869 to fight for working-class legislation and to elect workers to Parliament, with or without the Liberal Party's endorsement.

Funded by members who joined for an annual subscription of one shilling, the LRL stressed the political independence of working people. One of its leaders explained that the “working classes had come to the conclusion that the middle classes were but the sorry representatives of labour in Parliament, and for the future they intended to look after themselves.” Yet sensing that founding an independent party was premature, the LRL fought for the mantle of the “true” Liberal Party.

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In the 1874 general election, the LRL endorsed fifteen workingmen for Parliament — significantly, the only winners were the two candidates, both mine workers, who had also received an official Liberal endorsement. And because the UK, like the United States, has a “[first past the post](#)” electoral system, in those constituencies where LRL candidates ran against official Liberal candidates, the progressive vote was split and Tories were generally elected.

Faced with the difficulty of winning as independents and the risk of being seen as spoilers, “Lib-Lab-ism” — running working-class activists, usually union representatives, as official Liberal candidates — became labor's dominant approach for decades. Any chance of actually electing workers passed through running as Liberals because, as one observer noted, advocates of labor representation could not “seduce the great mass of their fellow workingmen from their allegiance to the Liberal party.”

Historian Henry Pelling [describes](#) the situation as follows:

The Liberal Party was not a monolithic structure: and the acceptance of the leadership of [Liberal leader] [Gladstone](#) on general questions did not necessarily mean that the labour interest need forego its special organization. In the circumstances of the time, there was no reason why the Labour Representation League should not continue to exist among, and indeed to struggle against, the other elements of the Liberal Party. In 1885, twelve Lib-Labs were elected to Parliament and the number of labor candidates [elected](#) locally rose from twelve to two hundred between 1882 and 1892.

Most voted with the Liberals, especially its [radical](#) wing, on general political questions, taking autonomous initiatives mostly around pro-worker legislation like the eight-hour day and labor law reform.

Some leftist critics lambasted Liberal-Labour MPs for their ties to a capitalist party, [arguing](#) that their moniker itself was a contradiction, “as if a man could be a sober drunkard.” While it’s true that their identification with a business-led party muddied their political independence, such condemnations of the Lib-Labs were short-sighted. “Whatever their limitations, Liberal-Labour representatives *did* constitute a distinct working-class current in national political life and, as such, a step forward in the process of class formation.”

Whatever their limitations, Liberal-Labour representatives *did* constitute a [distinct](#) working-class current in national political life and, as such, a step forward in the process of [class formation](#). Flash forward to today and you can see a similar process unfolding with democratic socialists recently elected to [local](#), [statewide](#), and [national](#) office on the Democratic Party ballot line. Like in the UK, a consistent growth in the US left’s electoral power over the coming years will necessarily put us on a collision course with the tens-of-thousands of Democratic politicians and operatives whose [careers and prestige](#) depend on preserving the status quo.

A Slow Separation From Liberalism

Both of the party-building strategies dominant on the US Left over the past century — [realigning](#) the Dems and making a [clean break](#) from them — were also attempted in Britain. And like in the United States, it eventually became clear that neither approach was working.

While some Lib-Labs argued for the eventual formation of a distinct labor party once labor was better organized, leaders of the moderate socialist Fabian Society articulated a strategy of [permeation](#), which, like US [realignment politics](#), meant working collaboratively inside the Liberal Party to transform it in a socialist direction. In a few isolated working-class constituencies like the [rural Durham coalfields](#), “working-class radicalism . . . took control of the party and moulded Liberalism into its own image.” Yet on a national level, the rise in worker representation in these years was still far lower than the size of the working class in the population as a whole. And for a growing number of labor activists, the fault for this lay with the Liberal Party itself. “On a national level, the rise in worker representation in these years was still far lower than the size of the working class in the population as a whole. And for a growing number of labor activists, the fault for this lay with the Liberal Party itself.”

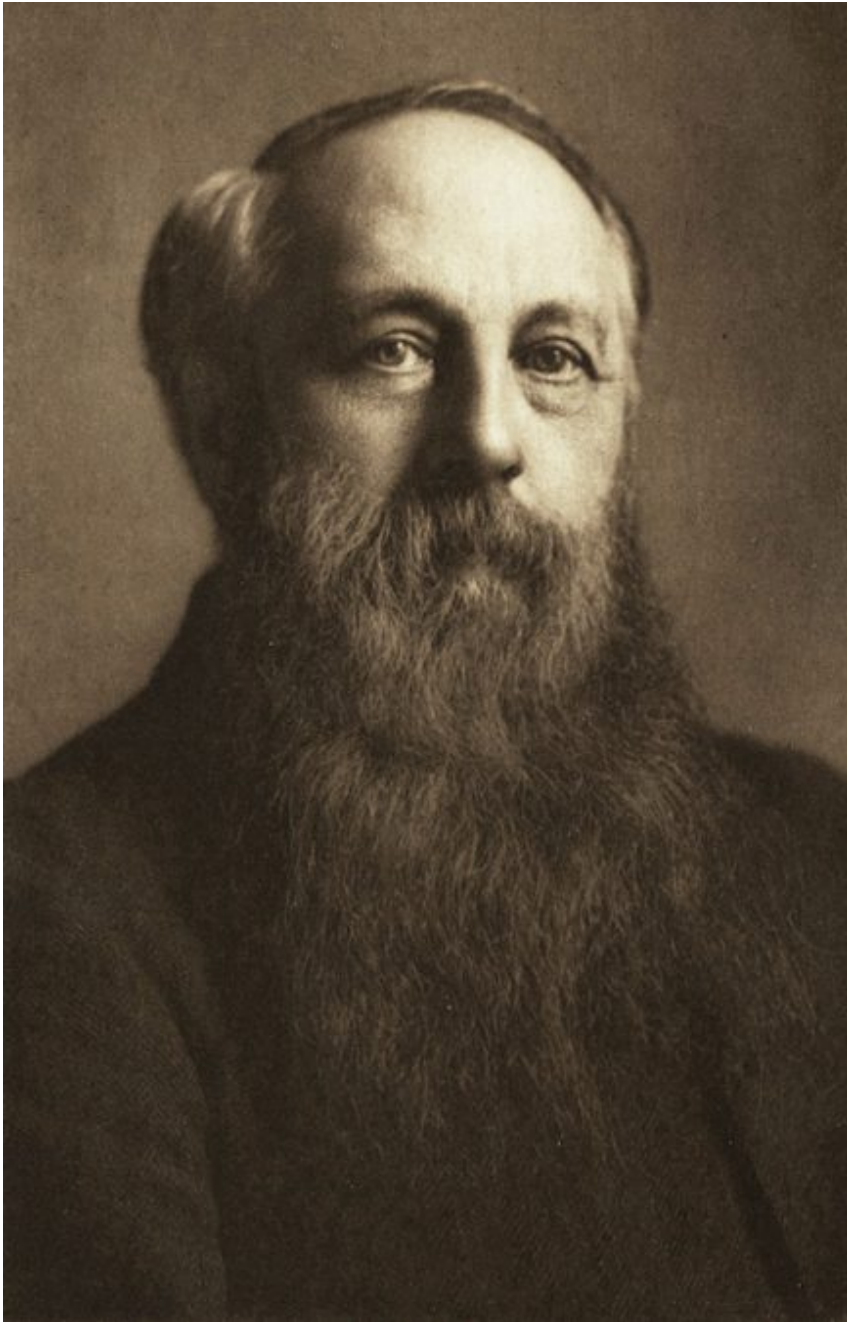
The obstinate [refusal](#) of most Liberal organizations to accept working-class candidates [proved](#) to be the most decisive political factor causing organized labor to eventually break with the party. In contrast with the modern US [primary system](#), Liberal candidates were directly chosen by local party machines, leading to an endless series of selection conflicts between upper-class liberals and organized workers. Ramsay MacDonald, an ex-liberal who would eventually lead the Labour Party, [concluded](#) that “we didn’t leave the Liberals. They kicked us out and slammed the door in our faces.” Labour’s process of separating from liberalism, however, lasted all the way up until

1918, by which time most other European countries had long since witnessed the formation of mass socialist parties. One reason for this delay was the [heterogeneity](#) of Britain's working class, whose distinct ethnic, regional, and skill layers became disillusioned with Liberals and organized at different tempos. Another factor was the Liberal Party's political flexibility. Seeking to head socialism off at the pass, the party gave itself a new lease on life in the first years of the new century under the stewardship of radical "New Liberals" like [David Lloyd George](#), who championed welfare policies such as national pensions and insurance.

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But most consequential of all was the relatively democratic nature of Britain's political regime compared with [low-inclusion](#) countries like Germany. A relatively early and widespread conquest of popular male suffrage made it both possible and necessary for the Libs to rely on working-class voters, and to attempt to incorporate their representatives.

At the same time, Britain's use of "first past the post" voting, in which whichever candidate received the most votes won all the representative seats, rather than [proportional representation](#), generated strong pressures to work within the Liberal Party so as to avoid "spoiling" the anti-Tory vote. In contrast, the German state's semi-authoritarianism [undercut](#) the political space for liberalism, alienated workers, and pushed the country's socialist movement to affirm a strict opposition to all other parties and the imperial state.



H. M. Hyndman, the founder of Britain's first socialist party, the Social Democratic Federation, circa 1911.

Failing to see how distinct contexts required different strategic approaches, Britain's first socialist party — the [Social Democratic Federation \(SDF\)](#) — attempted to copy the same class-struggle isolationism pioneered by the German Social Democratic Party. Ironically, this overly sharp affirmation of political independence cost the SDF's founders the working-class base they had built while previously operating within the Liberal Party. After federation leader H. M. Hyndman issued a manifesto in 1881 denouncing all Liberals as hollow hypocrites, worker-radicals [quit](#) the organization. Middle-class socialists filled their place.

Doctrinairism mired the SDF in marginality until its dissolution in 1911. Hyndman privately expressed his “disgust” with what he saw as workers' lack of class

consciousness, and he publicly lambasted the pragmatic socialists who helped found the Labour Party. The latter responded by ridiculing the SDF's sectarianism and lack of popular support, noting that at its current pace of electoral growth, it would take "about two thousand years" to win elections. "German formulas," they [argued](#), were not a recipe for success in Britain.

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The trajectory of the SDF underscores an important lesson: socialists may be so successful in separating from liberals that they end up permanently separating from workers in the process. But for political independence to be *working-class* independence, you actually need the support of working people. Instead of judging tactics by the yardstick of their formal radicalism, it makes more sense to assess whether they are in practice promoting independent class organization and mass action.

There are no recipes for what this looks like, no timeless formulas for socialist success. Contrary to the assumptions of many radicals [past](#) and [present](#), strategies formulated for semi-authoritarian [Germany](#), not to mention [tsarist Russia](#), are not particularly suitable roadmaps to victory in [capitalist democracies](#).

Because working-class independence is so strategically central for socialists, it's understandable that many have adopted a kind of simplistic analysis of "the more political independence, the better." But as demonstrated by the SDF's self-imposed marginalization, bullheaded insistence on certain forms of political independence, no matter what the political context or cost, can actually undermine socialists' ability to build powerful, politically independent organizations.

Pragmatic Socialism

Credit for founding the Labour Party largely goes to those socialists — organized into the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1893 — who organized within the working class as it actually was, not as they wished it to be. One of their central contributions was to help forge the militant "[new unionism](#)" that rocked Britain from the 1880s onward by uniting skilled and unskilled workers in trade unions and militant industrial actions. Activists of the soon-to-be-formed ILP played prominent leadership roles in most of these battles, including the historic 1889 Great Dock Strike — a struggle which, as one strike leader later [noted](#), "marked the beginning of that close alliance in thought and purpose between the Trade Union Movement and the Socialist Movement which produced in due time the Labour Party."

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Socialists also pursued the less glamorous but no less important work of [transforming unions](#) from the bottom up — efforts that were essential for aiding organized labor in confronting employers and, eventually, the government. With a rise in strikes and union organizing up through 1918 came repeated efforts by ruling-class politicians —

via both the Liberal and Conservative parties — to curb the movement by limiting labor rights, most notably through the infamous 1901 [Taff Vale](#) decision that held unions financially liable for damages incurred during strikes. Anti-labor counteroffensives, in turn, pushed union activists to combine industrial struggle with stronger labor representation in Parliament.



Without this workplace-based upsurge, British workers probably would not have had enough class solidarity, organizational capacity, or experiences of antagonism with the Liberal establishment to build their own party. But labor unrest on its own did not bring about the rise of independent working-class politics, as indicated by the continued marginalization of the SDF as well as the inability of US workers to build their own party in [analogous](#) periods of [labor](#) unrest.

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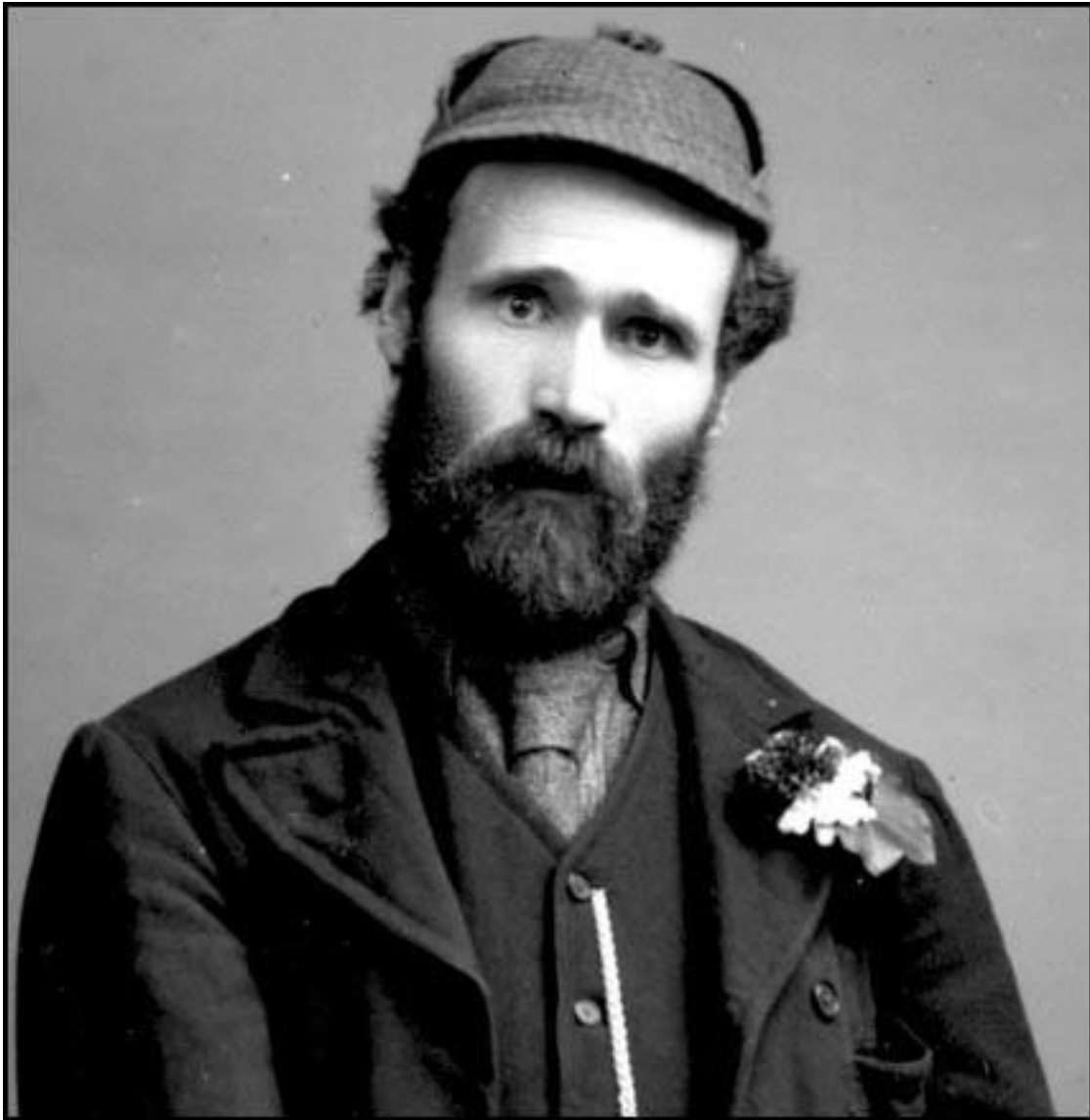
One more factor was essential for Labour’s emergence: socialist efforts to unite the working class politically through its various stages of development. Class formation, the process of cohering individuals into a collective political agent, is never automatic. An important early step was taken by flamboyant mine worker union leader Keir Hardie in Scotland, where the antagonisms between organized labor and Liberals had become more acute than elsewhere in the UK. Hardie had pushed for his local Liberal Party organization in 1888 to accept him as their candidate for Parliament. When it refused, he ran as an independent.



Keir Hardie speaks at a Woman's Suffrage rally in Trafalgar Square in 1908. Politically, however, Hardie's continued identification with the national Liberal Party was indicated by his campaign handbill's [slogan](#) "a vote for Hardie is a vote for Gladstone," the Liberal leader. Despite soundly losing the race, Hardie founded the Scottish Labour Party (SLP) later that year. Supporting electoral efforts both [inside and outside](#) of local Liberal structures, Hardie's organization [called upon](#) the national Liberal Party to adopt the SLP program if it wanted to prevent a split with the base. Hardie remained agnostic on the question of whether the Liberal Party could be reformed — but he was certain that the future of working-class politics lay in [winning over](#) and organizing its popular base, which continued to generally identify with the party, if not with all its leaders and policies.

This orientation to Liberal workers proved successful in the UK's first big breakthrough for independent politics, when Hardie was elected in 1892 to Parliament as an independent. His campaign [manifesto](#) formulated his stance as follows: Generally speaking I am in agreement with the present programme of the Liberal Party so far as it goes, but I reserve to myself the absolute and unconditional right to take such action irrespective of the exigencies of party welfare, as may to me seem needful in the interest of the workers.

Despite this political ambivalence, Hardie's election as an independent — combined with his fiery rhetoric and his insistence (provocative at the time) on wearing a [deerstalker cap](#) rather than a top hat in Parliament — made a splash in the British political scene. Buoyed by the victory, Hardie joined together with like-minded socialists across the UK the following year to found the ILP. Because of its founders' overarching desire to attract working-class liberals, the ILP kept socialism out of its name and focused its efforts on [winning over](#) trade unionists to independent politics.



Keir Hardie, in his deerstalker cap, c. 1880.

Hoping that working people were finally ready to break from Gladstone's party, both the ILP and Hardie now attempted to take a more antagonistic stance against the Liberal Party. Yet the results of the 1895 elections made clear that this hope was premature: the ILP's twenty-eight independent candidates were all badly defeated, as was Hardie himself. Chastened by the debacle, the ILP under Hardie and MacDonald's leadership was pragmatic enough to recalibrate. Dropping their aspirations to turn their organization directly into labor's mass party, ILPers softened their approach to Liberals and doubled down on pushing unions to take steps toward forming an independent party.

While [preaching](#) about the emancipation of labor, and while continuing to run independent candidates in industrial strongholds, ILP leaders were by 1899 also publicly indicating their willingness to forge a "working agreement" with anti-war Liberals and to support the formation of a Liberal government, insofar as it would benefit the working class. Their new strategy was summed up in MacDonald's [maxim](#) that "independence is not isolation."

The most thorough [study](#) of labor politics in this period concludes that "whatever the

compromises forced upon [ILP leaders] by their decision . . . they deserve credit for their perception that this was indeed the path to political success.” As demonstrated by the SDF’s continued [weakness](#), the alternative to ILP pragmatism was not the creation of a revolutionary workers’ party but the creation of no workers’ party at all.

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Leftists in the United States today would do well to learn from the efforts of Britain’s Independent Labour Party. Effective socialist politics is always a terrain of wagers, tactical flexibility, and pragmatic adjustments in response to events. Unfortunately, there’s no way to completely avoid bending to the pressures of co-optation or marginalization — and when the Left and organized labor remain weak, the latter is often the greater danger for radicals.

Integration and isolation are both slippery slopes, yet too many socialists still only see the dangers of co-optation because they’ve already rolled to the bottom of the slope of marginalization.

The Labour Representation Committee

The ILP’s political efforts — combined with an increased interest among various unions in independent political action during the late 1890s — finally bore fruit in late February 1900, when 129 socialists and union delegates, representing a third of organized labor’s members, came together in London to jointly discuss the sponsorship of working-class parliamentary candidates.

Roundly rejecting the SDF’s [proposal](#) to found “a party organisation separate from the capitalist parties, based on a recognition of the class war [and socialism],” the body instead adopted Hardie’s counterproposal to [establish](#) a distinct Labour group in Parliament, who shall have their own whips, and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to co-operate with any party which for the time being may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interests of labour, and be equally ready to associate themselves with any party in opposing measures having an opposite tendency.

The resolution as well as the body’s adopted name, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), were modest. ILP leaders correctly assessed that most workers and unionists, including those present at the conference, were not yet ready to completely break with the Liberals, let alone to adopt socialism. Though the SDF quit the body and denounced the ILP’s “treachery,” the approach of Hardie and MacDonald — the latter of whom was chosen to be the LRC’s secretary — was necessary to keep the existing delegates on board with a small but significant step toward independence, which could pave the way for winning over the rest of labor in the years to come. Most workers and unionists in these years continued to support the Libs. Eight Lib-Lab MPs were returned in the 1900 election, compared to only two LRC-endorsed candidates, Hardie and Richard Bell, a railway union leader who had received national Liberal Party support and who had endorsed the Liberal candidate running for the other seat in his constituency.

Pushing for class independence and socialism while wooing the Libs' popular base was not an easy task. Hardie lamented that "the keen edge has been taken off our Socialist propaganda by our growing association with the Trade Union movement." Yet even with union support, LRC candidates generally continued to lose in [three-cornered contests](#) in which they opposed both Tories and Liberals. But independent labor candidacies were now often strong enough to keep Liberals from winning by splitting the vote in these elections.

Despite these local LRC-Liberal conflicts — and in part because of them — both formations searched for some sort of agreement, first on a local and then on a national level. The existence of [multimember parliamentary districts](#) facilitated such a rapprochement because, as Hardie put it, "if the Liberal party would be content to select one candidate, and leave [the LRC] with one candidate, that fact alone would be productive of good fellowship, and would work to their mutual advantage."

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Since workers were still much the weaker partner in any such alliance, the LRC decided in 1903 to strengthen its bargaining position by consolidating its independent organization, tightening its candidate selection processes, and raising money from its unions and members for a national parliamentary fund. For their part, Liberals were eager to take back the reins of power — their last majority government had ended in 1885 — and they were [pessimistic](#) about their chances of doing so without the tacit support of Labour; this meant finding ways to reach electoral agreements on a local level, since Britain does not have a presidential system.

It was in this context that MacDonald, with Hardie's support, struck a behind-the-scenes deal with Gladstone for the 1903 general election to minimize vote splitting by letting each other run uncontested against the Tories in a large number of constituencies. Though in hindsight the pact appears to have facilitated the party's demise, in the short term it was a boon for the Libs, helping them sweep to power in 1906. And for the LRC, the pact resulted in the election of five MPs in 1903 and twenty-nine in 1906 — of these, the overwhelming majority had run in constituencies without a Liberal candidate. Ironically, it was a deal with the party of the bosses that made possible labor's big independent political breakthrough.

The 1906 general election was a watershed in British politics, even if Labour was still the Liberals' junior partner. After three decades of autonomous labor representation within the Liberal Party, Lib-Lab MPs were for the first time outnumbered by independent labor candidates. Conscious of the political turning point, the LRC responded to the 1906 election by changing its name to the Labour Party.

British workers finally had their own mass party. But it would take another twelve years of alliances and conflicts with Liberals before their final political divorce papers were signed.

Forging Independence

Labour's result in 1906 was a major political breakthrough. But because the Labour

Party's electoral wins had depended on an alliance with Liberals, who were more powerful and influential than ever before, British leftists still had to walk a [difficult](#) political tightrope.

On the one hand, excessive identification with the Liberals threatened to undermine Labour's very *raison d'être* by undercutting the spread of class consciousness and the fight for working-class interests. Accommodating a party that, as Hardie pointed out, was no less than the Tories "dependent upon the purses of the rich for its very existence" would demoralize Labour's base and obscure to working-class voters why they should vote Labour rather than Liberal.

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On the other hand, if they attacked Liberals too strongly, this could make it harder to push pro-worker reforms in Parliament. And though most of the adopted legislation fell short of Labour's desires, the Liberal-Labour alliance *did* win substantial reforms from 1906 through 1914, including reversing the anti-union Taff Vale judgement, taxing the rich, granting governmental health insurance and sick pay to millions, providing free meals to school children, granting government pensions to many seniors, establishing minimum wage laws and labor protections, and expanding education access for working-class children. An overly antagonistic stance risked helping the Tories retake power, which could spark a backlash from Labour's base and imperil progressive legislative efforts past and present.



Leaders of the Labour Representation Committee in 1906: (L-R) Arthur Henderson, G. N. Barnes, Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden, Will Crooks, Keir Hardie, John Hodge, James O'Grady, and David Shackleton.

Without a clear way out of this [dilemma](#), the Labour Party muddled forward with an ambivalently independent approach. At the same time as ILPers continued to preach socialism — "to make Socialists is the one vital thing," [argued](#) MacDonald — and as Labour gradually increased the number of constituencies it contested up through 1914, both continued to de facto ally with Liberals in electoral contests and in Parliament. Indeed, the closeness of the 1910 general election results meant that the newly elected Liberal government became dependent on Labour and Irish MPs for its continued existence. Unlike with the previous Liberal government, independent Labour MPs now [no longer](#) sat in Parliament's opposition benches.

Discontent with Labour's strategy spread among party activists. Yet the spectacular

inability of revolutionary socialists, both [inside](#) and [outside](#) the Labour Party, to garner any sustained electoral support [testified](#) to the prematureness of their appeals for all-out war against the Libs — an approach, MacDonald noted, that often seemed to be more anti-Liberal than pro-worker.

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In contrast with leftist denunciations of the supposed cowardice of Labour and ILP leaders who were grappling with this dilemma, Ralph Miliband later [argued](#) that while Labour could have searched for ways to more loudly voice its independent views on political life, in those years of conflict, “it was inevitable that the Labour Party should side with the Liberals against the Conservatives.”

Labour’s socialist leadership, to quote historian [R. I. McKibbin](#), “had made the best of what was, in every way, a bad situation.” It wagered that by staying the course and patiently accumulating power, Labour would at some point in the future be able to displace Liberals as Britain’s “second party.”

To the surprise of many, this wager was eventually vindicated when, due to their controversial leadership of Britain’s participation in World War I, Liberals [dramatically split](#) in 1916–18. With its hitherto allies suddenly weak and [divided](#), Labour’s leadership seized the moment, [pivoted](#) to full opposition against all parties, and outpaced the Libs in the 1918 general election. A half century after workers took their first steps to represent themselves in Parliament, Labour had finally become Britain’s main political alternative to the Tories.

For all its [weaknesses](#), the Labour Party over the coming decades won major social-democratic [reforms](#) and helped crystallize relatively high rates of class consciousness and class [organization](#). The fact that Britain today has public [health care](#) and unionization [rates](#) that are more than double that of the United States helps underscore the continued relevance of an [old](#) socialist axiom: workers need a [party](#) of their own.

Prospects for Today

While US leftists until recently have attempted to realign the Democratic Party or make a clean break from it, Labour’s rise in Britain underscores the viability of what I call a dirty break strategy: using the Democratic ballot line to build up independent working-class organization in the direction of a mass workers’ party through a split in the [Democratic coalition](#).

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When progressively inclined [workers](#) and their organizations [overwhelmingly](#) support a liberal party, and when electoral rules entrench a two-party system through the [spoiler dilemma](#), the benefits of working within (and even [identifying with](#)) such a party often outweigh the costs. Democratic socialism’s [rebirth](#) over the past five years

has clearly borne this out. And Britain's experience can help us further think through how to deepen our efforts to organize the Democrats' [multiracial](#) working-class [base](#) away from the party establishment, and to forge a majoritarian electoral instrument to enact radical social change.

The starting point for successful left politics is not how to [delegitimize](#) the Democrats and form a [new party](#) as soon as possible — it's how to expand independent working-class political agency, which requires different tactics at different stages in the class formation process. Mass politics, politics [for the millions](#), is necessarily context specific.



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York City, 2019. (Dimitri Rodriguez / Wikimedia Commons)

For the foreseeable future, we should join Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in fighting to push out corporate politicians and money from the Democratic Party. This, not calls to form a new party, is what it looks like today to effectively agitate for a mass workers' party.

Of course, working within a [corporate-dominated](#) party or supporting [establishment candidates](#) does pose considerable dangers, as evidenced by the countless failures of realignment attempts in US history. But this is a risk, a hazard of effective politics, not an inevitability.

Whereas realigners in the [1930s](#) and [1960s](#) worked inside official channels and maintained friendly relations with Democratic leaders, leftists can take a different approach by using primary challenges to openly confront the party establishment and build up their own independent profile and organizations in the process.

This points to a limitation in the campaigns of Ocasio-Cortez and most of today's prominent anti-corporate electoral insurgents, including Sanders in [2020](#). Though their

candidacies have been essential for spurring membership increases in groups like the Sunrise Movement and Democratic Socialists of America, they have not generally found ways to use their resources to directly build up these year-round mass membership political organizations or to found new ones.

But without a massive growth of working-class organization, it is unlikely that we'll be able to change the relationship of forces sufficiently to prevent the nascent left electoral upsurge from getting absorbed or crushed — or that we can generate the power necessary to win Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, police defunding, or the [democratization](#) of the US political regime. As the defeat of Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn [made clear](#), electoral insurgencies can [only go so far](#) when most working-class people [remain unorganized](#) and have not [experienced](#) the government deliver significant improvements in their lives.

That's why it's so important to fight for [legislative](#) wins and to build what socialists Jared Abbott and Dustin Guastella call a [party surrogate](#). The fate of these efforts, in turn, is inseparable from the [expansion and transformation](#) of the labor movement. On this question, Britain's later experience is particularly instructive: though industrial struggle was essential for the party's rise, Labour leaders after 1918 increasingly tended to [discourage](#) rather than promote workplace militancy, thereby undercutting their own policy agenda and their working-class [base](#).

It's difficult to predict how the conflict between a “party within the party” and the Democratic establishment will play out. But contrary to a [recent](#) trend of thought [among](#) democratic [socialists](#), we should not ignore the problems posed by identifying with (and participating in) a capitalist-dominated party, nor should we [downplay](#) the goal of building a workers' party with its own ballot line. There are good reasons why British socialists, even when obliged by circumstances to identify as Liberals, openly aspired to lead a major party. So long as the US Left remains a junior partner within the Democratic coalition, achieving [social democracy](#) and a [democratic socialist](#) society will remain out of reach. To [quote](#) Naomi Klein, the “Democratic party needs to be either decisively wrested from pro-corporate neoliberals, or it needs to be abandoned.”

Winning a viable ballot line primarily associated with class struggle candidates rather than corporate lackeys would not be an inconsequential [“immaterial”](#) achievement, as one recent [article](#) suggests. Given the importance of [party identification](#) in the U.S. for [cuing](#) voter [decisions](#), efforts to promote class consciousness and class organization will be fettered as long as workers organize within a party led by representatives of their bosses. No matter how many [useful articles](#) are written explaining the difference between state-run ballot lines and institutional parties, the overwhelming majority of voters don't make the same fine-grained distinctions.

Low-information voters — in other words, [most people](#) — will continue to view us as part of the same political team headed by corporate Democrats as long as we share the same ballot line associated with them. To a greater or lesser extent, they will not fully recognize the political chasm that separates socialists from the likes of Biden and Pelosi and they will tend to associate us with every bad thing that they do in office.

[Data](#) and recent [experience](#) show that the impact of national parties over [down ballot](#)

[races](#) continues to dramatically increase.

Identifying with a corporate-led party is certainly worth the costs for the time being, but there's no reason to claim that it is "[not a hindrance](#)" to socialist organizing. Even as we start to win [races](#) and material [reforms](#) in urban Democratic [strongholds](#), the absence of a major non-corporate ballot line undercuts our ability to appeal to and organize the large numbers of workers nationwide who are either indifferent to or hostile to the Democratic "brand" — and not necessarily for the wrong reasons. This is becoming especially problematic for our project as the neoliberalized Democratic Party as a whole continues to [hemorrhage](#) working-class voters by pivoting to middle-class suburbs.

Party identification is not the only reason to question the [assumption](#) that it's possible *before* a qualitative break in the party system to deliver "all the material results for the working class that we can through electoral organizing." Contrary to this [vision](#), the Democratic Party establishment *does* pose a "meaningful threat to our ability to strategically utilize the ballot line." It's hard to imagine that [billionaire-backed politicians and operatives](#) won't eventually try to use their considerable resources to constrict the space for internal socialist insurgencies.

It was less than a year ago that Democratic insiders [openly declared](#) their intention to overturn the will of primary voters by denying Bernie Sanders the presidential nomination in a contested Democratic convention. And though state-level elections, unlike presidential primaries, are regulated by the government, this only means that party leaders would have to reform laws to restrict our ability to contest primaries, as they've [done](#) in the past.

The US primary system has continued to [significantly evolve](#) through legislative fights over recent decades. A 2000 US Supreme Court [decision](#), for example, affirmed the right of parties as "private associations" to internally determine their candidate selection processes, including to [restrict](#) primary participation to "those who subscribe to [party] aims." There's no reason to assume that current regulations will remain intact once a party surrogate begins to pose a real threat to the status quo.

Electoral laws are not set in stone. And it's on this question of electoral reform that we can see the most immediate ramifications of what can often seem like an abstract socialist debate over hypotheticals: unless we acknowledge the real limitations of being a junior partner on the Democratic ballot line, there's no strategic reason for leftists to actively push to [open up](#) electoral space by [democratizing](#) the US [regime](#).

Wagering on a Dirty Break

The rise of Labour in the UK illustrates what a dirty break might look like, but contextual differences will certainly shape its form and rhythm in the United States. [Racial divisions](#) and geographic [unevenness](#) — in terms of electoral laws, economic development, and party identification — are even more pronounced here. And because America's [presidential](#) system, its [ballot access restrictions](#), and its [single-member](#) electoral districts are further impediments to forming third parties, and because the [undemocratic](#) nature of our political regime is a major block on pro-worker legislation, struggles for [democratic reforms](#) will likely be more central.

At the same time, the US state-run primary system deprives party leaders of the normal levers of power to arbitrarily exclude candidates. Even if Democratic leaders, like their British Liberal predecessors, wanted to contain an ascendant working-class left, the principal means to do this are their [well-funded](#), but [far-from-guaranteed](#), electoral efforts to defeat insurgents in primary contests.

Due to America's unique electoral arrangement, it's possible for workers to seize the reins of the Democratic Party through a clean sweep of the presidential and congressional primaries, followed by a radical overhaul of party and funding structures. But since this would require an enormous degree of independent working-class power, some sort of split may well occur first. Before we're sufficiently powerful to sweep national elections, the Left will probably become strong enough for establishment Democrats to [devise](#) mechanisms to push us out (e.g., by [reforming](#) primary [laws](#)), or strong enough to win democratic reforms like a national popular vote for president or proportional representation, thereby ending the spoiler problem. Fortunately, socialist strategy today doesn't depend on these speculations. A dirty-break orientation remains our strongest political wager despite the impossibility of knowing whether it'll be corporate Dems or the Left who will end up leaving the party. Even for those activists attempting to transform the Democratic Party into a social-democratic institution, the only realistic path forward is to organize working people independently of, and against, the billionaire-funded establishment. Faced with [crisis](#) upon [crisis](#), there's no time to lose. By forging [working-class power](#) within the belly of the Democratic coalition, we can build the party — and win the world — that we need.