



Steel City Socialist

June 2026: Pilot Issue

Join DSA!



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Socialists pack County Council to denounce ICE

by Josh S.

Member-to-member organizing gets the goods; council passes ordinance easily

In the first major test for its new ICE Out campaign, Pittsburgh DSA members turned out in droves at the March 10 Allegheny County Council meeting to demand the county cease cooperating with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The meeting, which followed weeks of coordinated advocacy from DSA and allied organizations, ended in success: The council voted 11-3 in favor of an ordinance introduced by Councilmember Bethany Hallam that would restrict county officials from most forms of cooperation with ICE.

Socialists lead the charge

Most striking was the huge number of DSA members who turned out to speak. DSA was by far the largest presence at the meeting, with 15 members giving public comment – no other organization had multiple self-identified members speak. Graduate student-worker union members testified to the fear gripping their international student colleagues; neighbors pointed out the impact family separation and deportations have for the local public school community; and several members simply shared personal stories highlighting the humanity of their immigrant neighbors and the basic ethical obligation facing the council.

The chapter reaped the benefit of its huge turnout because it came in prepared to meet the moment. Previously, at its February general meeting, the chapter adopted the ICE Out priority, committing itself to joining and building the mass movement against Donald Trump's terror squads. The timing could not have been more fortuitous: at a key political moment in the area, the chapter was able to mobilize its rank and file and become a hegemonic player in the action.

Strong organizing gets the goods

How did this come about? Looking underneath the proverbial hood of the organizing can give us a clue.

Pittsburgh DSA, like the organization as a whole, has experienced significant growth this year. From March 2025 to March 2026, the chapter grew from 574 to 849 members,

a 48 percent increase. Motivated by the genocide in Gaza, ICE terror and DSA member Zohran Mamdani's election as New York City mayor, new members have streamed into the chapter to get involved and make a difference politically. While this is an incredible development, chapter leaders have also been forced to grapple with how to activate these new members.

"The chapter reaped the benefit of its huge turnout because it came in prepared to meet the moment."

The answer lies in creating a structured space for members to organize and develop their skills. People typically join DSA because they want to do something to fight for socialism. The challenge of the activist core is to facilitate members' meaningful participation – or to put it simply, give them space to do something. This is a lot more work than it sounds. Sometimes leaders can get frustrated and think the chapter is too low on capacity to take on work. But putting in more work at the beginning will pay off later. Leaders should always go back to two key questions: 1) What am I asking members to do? 2) Am I giving them the tools to do it?

The ICE Out organizers created that space for member action. It started with giving people tools to act. Leaders split up the work. One member drafted talking points, to give people a base of knowledge of how to speak persuasively on the issue. Others set up digital communications for email and social media to get the message out. For a rank-and-file member, the asks were clear: Talk to your council member. Show up to the meeting. Speak at the meeting. And tell as many people you can to do the same thing.

What took the action to the next level was individual member contact, or asking people individually to do things. Organizers called members personally and recruited them to speak. They specifically targeted new members with their outreach – many of the

members who showed up had never given public comment or taken any action with DSA before. After a member volunteered, leaders followed up to make sure they had the tools they needed to participate. On the day of the meeting, organizers were on site to coordinate and personally welcome members.

Looking forward

The success of the County Council speak-out can serve as a model for the chapter's work going forward. When given the chance and tools to take meaningful action, members do it. Over time, the activist core can bring those members "under the hood" to take on planning tasks. Rinse and repeat, and a healthy organizing cycle appears. When problems come up, leaders should go back to those core questions and fine tune their asks.

The meeting also highlighted how strongly DSA could assert itself in local politics. Its large membership numbers and sharp political approach give it the ability to turn out to city and council meetings in larger numbers than possibly any other political organization. The chapter has already taken a huge positive step by coordinating more closely with its one city councilor, Deb Gross. One path members should explore is Portland DSA's model – its red shirts and signature logo have become a fixture at City Council meetings, with members showing up en masse to back their endorsed electeds in pushing a working-class agenda. This has created a virtuous cycle of raising the profile of socialist politics in the city while also helping pass policy that empowers workers and tenants.

In this reactionary political moment, Pittsburgh DSA has continued to grow in membership numbers and organizing acumen. With neighbors furious over anti-immigrant attacks and new members streaming into the socialist movement, DSA can seize the moment and be the lodestar of the battle for democracy. Adelante!

Local Labor News!

- Environmental Charter School Federation of Paraeducators unanimously passed an ICE Out resolution in April.
- Commonplace Coffee unionized with United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1776 on May 13 via voluntary recognition.
- REI Union, also with United Food and Commercial Workers, called a nationwide consumer boycott from May 15 - May 25.

Working class historical marker removed from Market Square

Original reporting for Steel City Socialist by Oriana R.

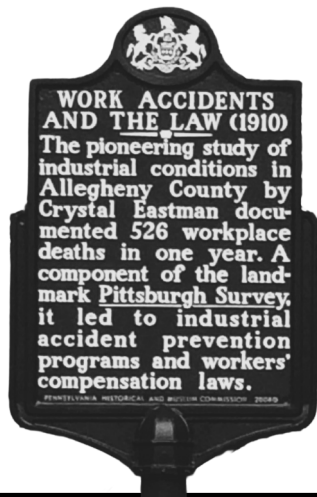
A major historical marker of working-class history in Pittsburgh has disappeared from Market Square where it stood prominently since 2008.

The marker, titled “Work Accidents and the Law,” commemorates a research study and book under the same name completed by American Civil Liberties Union founder Crystal Eastman. One of 2,600 cast aluminum plaques around the state, the marker was removed when Market Square was torn up for renovation in 2025. The renovation was spearheaded by the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership and guided by strategic plans from the Partnership as well as the Governor’s office and the City of Pittsburgh. The renovation was completed and unveiled on April 22 in time for the NFL Draft, but the marker was no longer there.

Several local residents who care deeply about the marker and its historical significance to the working class in Pittsburgh noticed the marker was missing and started to ask questions.

Charlie McCollester, a local labor historian who wrote the description for the plaque and submitted the request for its content and location in 2008, said he was particularly concerned after noticing the marker was missing in April. He wrote a letter to Mayor Corey O’Connor expressing concern over the marker’s removal and requesting that it be returned to Market Square. He hand delivered this letter, along with a copy of his book “The Point of Pittsburgh,” to the mayor’s office, but never heard back. Calder Buisch, a local labor lawyer and member of the Democratic Socialists of America, also noticed that the marker was missing and brought it to the attention of Steel City Socialist.

Steel City Socialist was able to confirm with the mayor’s office that it was removed during construction and placed in a Pittsburgh Department of Public Works warehouse. The mayor’s office said that they plan to move the marker to a different location and have reached out to the Pennsylvania Laborers’ District Council to help them decide where to relocate it.



Historical markers in Pennsylvania are managed by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and their locations are decided by the commission and residents who petition to have the marker erected. The commission’s Historical Marker Policy says: “If a property owner on which an Historical Marker is located requests its removal, Commission staff may remove it and reinstall it at another location.” The owner of Market Square, where the marker was located, is the City of Pittsburgh. The Commission told Steel City Socialist that they are working with the Pittsburgh City Planning Department on the planning and preparation for the marker to be reinstalled this year, but did not specify where.

The marker’s historical importance centers around perhaps the most extensive and groundbreaking worker health and safety study in the country, which documented 526 workplace deaths in Pittsburgh factories in just one year. The study was completed by Crystal Eastman as part of the Pittsburgh Survey and took place from 1906-1907. This research led to our current workers’ compensation law.

After publishing her book, Eastman drafted the first workers’ compensation law in the country. In addition to co-founding the ACLU, Eastman was also a feminist, an anti-World War I activist in Europe and the editor of a socialist newspaper during the first Red Scare. Buisch considers her a “model of who we should all want to be as socialists and as members of a community.”

When it stood, the marker helped present the workers’ side of history to Pittsburghers and tourists alike.

“The reality of the steel industry is that it was truly the worst of the worst of capitalist excess in the United States, where people were dying,” Buisch said. “People were getting permanently disabled, and then having their family starve to death, because they couldn’t work anymore in the industry.”

Buisch first noticed the marker by accident due to its prominent and central location in a walkable downtown Pittsburgh area. It was on his route to work and his eyes were primed for it after he learned about Crystal Eastman at the Heinz History Center. The Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership and O’Connor’s office both declined to comment on the decision to relocate the marker instead of replacing it to its original location. The mayor’s office has stated it is working to relocate it with an unspecified timeline.

McCollester and Buisch said it should stay in Market Square, as it was put there by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission for a reason. Formerly located in a pedestrian park, the marker allowed both tourists and locals to stumble across its history easily, and it is located near the United Steelworkers building. The square is also the longtime site of an annual Workers Memorial Day observance, which commemorates workers killed or injured by their work.

McCollester said that no one was able to find where exactly Crystal Eastman lived in Pittsburgh, so it could really go anywhere — but the high exposure and proximity to the United Steelworkers building and Workers Memorial Day make Market Square a good location.

“It’s very frustrating that I think one of the few places where people would be exposed to Crystal Eastman and exposed to the history of class and capitalism in America is getting taken away or moved out of a place where people actually would see it. It feels like it’s gonna be covered up and tucked away,” Buisch said.

Editor's Note

Steel City Socialist is a pilot project of the Pittsburgh Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) which exists to use writing to empower members of DSA and the broader working class in developing their voice and political analysis and to promote socialism throughout the Greater Pittsburgh Area.

The board pursues this mission by (1) Developing a collective socialist analysis of current events and wider trends in the labor movement and the broader political and social movements. (2) Highlighting, supporting, and helping to sharpen the work of local labor and DSA activists and the DSA as a whole. (3) Empowering workers and organizers to share their voices in consonance with our collective approach. (4) Fostering comradely debate and making space for dissonant opinions and perspectives. (5) Providing a creative outlet for the local working class and DSA members to opine on the miseries and joys of life under capitalism while fighting for socialism.

In Pittsburgh, work could be owned differently

By Lindsey Disler

Opinion

In the U.S., we're taught the only ways things get done are through private business or the government. For many, these options are deeply disappointing. But there is an underexamined alternative: worker-owned and community-owned cooperatives. When I ask fellow Pittsburghers what they know about co-ops, most think of the consumer grocery model, which had a resurgence in the 1960s and 70s, like the East End Food Co-op. But the cooperative movement, particularly here in Pittsburgh, has a far longer and more diverse history than most of us were taught.

Some of the earliest U.S. cooperatives date to the 1700s. The Underground Railroad is considered to be an early example, as it was governed by the member-conductors who ferried people, many through Pittsburgh, to freedom.

In 1819, workers formed a producer cooperative, the Pittsburgh Manufacturing Association, collectively buying and running a warehouse where artisan and cottage industry workers could produce and consign their products for sale or barter. Goods produced and sold by cooperative members included farm produce, butter, cheese, wool, whiskey, soap, cloth, nails, plows, furniture, and roughly 60 other items.

In 1847, the first mass-production worker-cooperative factory in Pittsburgh was opened by a group of iron molders. In the following years, their success led to cooperatives of glassblowers, silver-platers, puddlers, and boilers. These workers even started a cooperative newspaper called The Pittsburgh Unionist.

Union and cooperative development accelerates in waves tied to economic, social, and political upheavals such as during the Civil War era into the Gilded Age. In 1867, the International Molders Union organized a chain of more than 14 cooperative foundries in major cities, including Pittsburgh. These workers hoped cooperatives would replace the need for strikes, which was how workers won union recognition and bargaining prior to 1935. Workers hoped this was a permanent solution to fighting private employers over low wages and bad working conditions.

The International Molders model went under due to economic and other challenges of the Gilded Age. But in 1877, a general strike of workers took charge of Pittsburgh and organized their own survival programs for five days until the federal government sent troops in to regain control. The Pittsburgh Commune, as it was called, occurred four years after the historically more well-known Paris Commune of 1871, giving new meaning to the phrase "Pittsburgh, the Paris of Appalachia."

This grew into the efforts of the Knights of Labor (KOL), who organized at least sixteen worker cooperatives in the Pittsburgh region, part of a larger network of roughly 200 worker-owned cooperatives KOL organized by 1886. Unfortunately, the KOL and its cooperatives fell victim to a nationwide red scare after a bomb went off at a union rally in Chicago, commonly known as the Haymarket Affair.

Another significant era of cooperative growth in the U.S. was the Great Depression. When privately owned electric companies refused to run power lines to rural areas because it wasn't profitable, people organized to build cooperatives to share costs and increase access. Electric co-ops still cover roughly 56–75% of the total U.S. landmass today, primarily in rural and suburban areas.

Researchers and practitioners like Jessica Gordon Nembhard, whose book *Collective Courage* is essential reading, believe we're entering a fourth wave of cooperative development, particularly since the pandemic. The number of people seeking to form worker cooperatives has risen significantly, alongside a surge in union activity. The cost of living is climbing. Political and environmental instability is accelerating. Neither government nor private enterprise are equipped for these crises. Bringing true democratic principles into decision-making and economic distribution, cooperatives can

empower people to solve their own problems and build their future collectively.

Consolidation of ownership into ever fewer private hands is making life worse for the rest of us. Notable examples include media mergers, such as Paramount Skydance and Warner Bros Discovery, which now control nearly half of the top 50 most-subscribed-to paid-TV channels. This consolidation means fewer, worse choices in media, reflecting narrower interests, lower wages, and job loss for workers, while companies continue to inflate prices.

We aren't taught the ways that work and control of resources could be done differently. This omission is not accidental; it reflects the owning class whose interests our economic education has served. But the cooperative tradition is long, global, and very much alive.

"Bringing true democratic principles into decision-making and economic distribution, cooperatives can empower people to solve their own problems and build their our future collectively."

Cooperatives are on every continent, in over 100 countries. Nearly 3 billion people are made economically secure by cooperatives, with more than 12% of humanity participating in the 3 million cooperatives operating worldwide. Like unions, cooperatives are people-centered enterprises which emerge in response to economic discrimination and market failure. Cooperatives are collectively owned by the people who use them, not by whoever buys the most shares. Research consistently demonstrates worker cooperatives deliver economic and social advantages: enhanced workplace stability, increased productivity, greater resilience during downturns, higher wages, profit-sharing, and better benefits than comparable private businesses. Crucially, cooperatives extend their impact beyond membership to broader community development, providing essential services while anchoring jobs locally.

I've been a labor and community organizer for 14 years and seen workers fight for and win remarkable victories by building collective power in their workplaces and communities, particularly here in Pittsburgh. For example, Pitt Faculty Union workers, through organizing, won big raises, particularly for the lowest-paid faculty. Many salaries nearly doubled when the salary floor was raised to \$60,000 in their first contract, not to mention the job security measures that were secured. This contract win is inspiring, but the current labor paradigm of contract bargaining back and forth isn't currently enough to provide for the majority of people or the planet.

Pittsburgh is already part of the resurgent worker cooperative movement. Third Space Bakery in Bloomfield, Greenhouse Co-op in Greenfield, and Pin-Up Posters Courier Collective are worker-owned enterprises taking root here. Keystone Development Center helps develop new cooperatives in Pittsburgh and the Mid-Atlantic region. The Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives provides resources for worker-owned and member-owned businesses in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Pittsburgh Alliance for People-Empowered Reporting (PAPER), a group of Newspaper Guild of Pittsburgh journalists and supporters, gathered after the Post-Gazette announced its May 3 closure, which was later avoided by a sale to a new owner, the Venetoulis Institute for Local Journalism. PAPER, in light of massive layoffs under the Gazette's new ownership, is continuing to host a series of town halls to find community support for a worker-community-run newspaper model. I'm planning to support them and encourage others in the community to join in exploring these models.

Wrap this poem around a brick and throw it

By Steph Sorensen

Wrap this poem around a brick and throw it
through the boss's window
not the window at the office the window
at the boss's home
let the glass glimmer sharply let the shards
be swept through labor gone unpaid
wrap this poem
around a brick and throw it
in the river tied to the letters from the debt collector
not the letters that say your account is past due the letters
that say they will take what you owe right out
of your paycheck
let the river runoff
shimmer smartly let the silt
that churns and grinds osage orange seeds for want
of mammoth teeth shred the letters too let debt go
the way the mammoths went wrap this poem around
a brick and throw it on the pile
until there's enough stacked for the landlord to charge rent
not the rent you pay to live
under a browning ceiling not the rent
you pay to listen to your favorite song not the rent that rises
steady as the temperature the seas the misery the people the rent
that says your home will never be yours
let the fury simmer darkly let the rage
loose in a poem wrap this poem around a brick
and throw it

From the Pittsburgh DSA member archives

by Ryan B.

Two original buttons from the groups that would eventually form the Democratic Socialists of America. The New American Movement — one of many “New Left” groups that formed amid Vietnam War protest and the struggle for civil rights — joined in 1982 with the more moderate, “Old Left” Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee to create DSA.

What began as a small group in the right-wing-dominated 1980s would expand in the 2010s to become the largest U.S. socialist organization, with more than 100,000 members today. DSA has deep roots in Pittsburgh, home to a New American Movement branch in the '70s and other socialist groups going back to the 19th century.

For Manuel

By Robert Terrill

Creative Nonfiction

A lifetime ago, in early 21st-century Seattle, my then partner and I began working at our favorite restaurant.

We were beloved by the family that owned it and well-liked by the Sikh cooks. It was far from the worst job I ever had. We waited tables there, enjoying a delicious free Indian meal with every shift. The kitchen's ventilation system worked terribly, so eye-burning smoke from the tandoor oven often filled not only the restaurant, but much of the kitschy Wallingford mini-mall in which the restaurant resided.

My partner and I were particularly close to the middle-aged Salvadoran dishwasher Manuel. Both Manuel and the cooks worked from before opening till close.

Manuel tried to teach me Spanish, but I was a poor student. My partner translated what I couldn't understand, and between that and body language, he and I understood each other fairly well.

One day, Manuel walked up to me and gestured to my hands. He then raised his own hands. They were horrendously misshapen, swollen, and rough beyond words; transfigured from decades of hard labor. The knuckles were like large lugnuts, the fingers stretched too far inwardly, and his nails looked like they were drawn on by smeared marker. They barely looked human. I felt guilty for not having noticed before.

Several months later, Manuel asked the owner and chef if he could get one day off a week. It made sense, even the three cooks got one day off a week, reducing their hours by 10 or 11 hours weekly.

Manuel was quickly fired after that request. I guess the owner felt he had no use for a dishwasher who didn't work 7 days a week. He was quickly replaced by a young Latino man. Manuel came back the next week with a translator to ask for his job back, but the owner refused to talk to him.

When I think about why I'm passionate about socialism, it's for Manuel, and how our predatory civilization completely failed him.

It's for the planet.

It's for all of us.

Manuel, I hope you're doing ok, buddy.

