The Socialist Night School

A HOW-TO GUIDEBOOK
The Socialist Night School is not a “school” in the conventional sense. There are no grades or Powerpoint slides, no fees or enrollment lists, and no prerequisites. Anyone, DSA member or not, may attend the Night School. They may do so for as many or few sessions as they choose, and while there, may participate in discussions as actively or passively as they like. Familiarity with socialist theory is not assumed.

This program is similar to traditional left reading groups. What separates the two is a systematic and comprehensive scope. Our curriculum is intended as a survey of a wide range of perspectives, from historical to contemporary, from densely theoretical to imminently practical, and from every part of the spectrum of Left politics. For this reason, the Night School casts a wider net than those groups that focus on a single author or topic (e.g. Marx or labor history). This is because our goal was to design an educational program inclusive of the broadest range of participants, from those people attending their first DSA event to those with extensive backgrounds in political theory.
Socialists engage in intellectual activity not simply because political questions are interesting, but because the answers to those questions have consequences for the real world. The Night School is not intended as a substitute for organizing work, nor is it based on the assumption that one must know *Capital* in its entirety in order to be active on the Left. Scholarship is no substitute for the hard work of organizing.

Even so, we reject the dichotomy all too commonly drawn between theory and practice. Further, we take seriously the role of intellectual activity—of writing, thinking, and debate—that has always animated leftist activity. Ultimately, we believe that the Left can only hope to be a political force if we link thought to action.

In this sense, the Night School is more than just a reading group. It is intended to offer DSA a space for serious thinking about the past, present, and future of socialist politics. On its face, putting together a discussion group can seem rather trivial: pick some readings, find a space, and then start talking. But this larger goal comes with unique challenges that should shape a political education program.
Our slogan for the Night School is “an approachable but rigorous series of ideological discussions.” People coming to DSA possess varying levels of experience with theory and organizing skills. Some of us have been lucky enough to spend years memorizing *Rules for Radicals* or writing a thesis unleashing a devastating critique of neoliberal economics. Many others have not had these luxuries. An organization that treats all as equal regardless of familiarity with doctrine, dogma, or skills needs an education program capable of attracting and integrating people of differing backgrounds.

We call our program “approachable” because our goal is to bring together all people. We designed our course with the assumption that any who attend would minimally have an interest in learning more about the Left, but we presuppose no specific knowledge, not even of foundational concepts such as socialism, democracy, or capitalism. Still, the Night School is not designed as a pure introduction. While our sessions often start by establishing working definitions of baseline terms, discussions are meant to lead to deeper questions and facilitate debates that should interest even a socialist who has spent a decade reading radical theory.

For this reason, we say that the Night School is still “rigorous.” Our program is rooted in the belief that all people are capable of serious intellectual work. It is designed to encourage people to engage with ideas that are difficult, new, and even antithetical to their core assumptions. We do not want to subject people to speeches or tell them what to think, but we do believe that by putting different political perspectives in front of people and asking questions, people can assess the merits of arguments and become better at defending their beliefs.

In the end, the Night School is designed to create an alternative to a common liberal notion of “The Discourse.” All too often, political
ideas are exchanged at the level of snappy takes or critiques of form over content. These practices are rooted in the ideological notion that some perspectives should be accepted without reflection. We reject this approach to thought. In order to foster a climate of genuine debate and discussion, we try to understand the ideas behind arguments, along with the political implications of certain premises.

Past a commitment to the creative potential of human beings, no one is told what to think or what conclusions to draw. Instead, everyone is encouraged to voice their opinions, helping to create an atmosphere that is inquisitive, lively, and dedicated to the growth of political thought.
The Night School syllabus is “modular” in construction. It presents a sequence of topics arranged into a curriculum. You can easily choose topics that best suit the interests and needs of your chapter, highlighting not only your educational goals (e.g. an overview of Marxian theory), but also issues that align with larger organizational activities (e.g. a session on healthcare to prepare for a single payer campaign, or a session on imperialism to prepare for an antiwar action).

A Night School covers a diversity of topics, focused around three key areas:

1. **History:** The history of the Left, from the Russian Revolution to the Trump election

2. **Theory:** theoretical approaches to socialist thought, from Marx and Engels’ Communist Manifesto to DSA’s “Resistance Rising”

3. **Practice:** practical concerns of contemporary Left activity, from M4A to BDS
A good Night School tries to strike a balance between these three areas. It is tempting to respond to a sense of intellectual priority (e.g. a belief that reading Marx is necessary for socialists) or urgency (e.g. the need to get people to show up for local campaigns). The Night School is intended to link up these aspects of socialist activity, which are typically regarded as separate. We reject a common tendency to prioritize current events or separate theory from “the work.” There are no practical programs which are not conditioned by ideological assumptions, and our political choices construct and redefine our ideas.

In this spirit, the Night School might include not only canonic thinkers (e.g. Rosa Luxemburg, CLR James), but also contemporary public intellectuals (e.g. Noam Chomsky, Adolph Reed, Angela Davis), recent writing (e.g. *The New Jim Crow*, the *Jacobin* prison abolition debate), and the broad range of platforms where contemporary Left thought appears (e.g. In *These Times*, *Current Affairs*, and *Socialist Register* as well as publishers such as Verso and Haymarket). Our goal is not just to teach people about content, but also to help people navigate the many formats and institutions that structure political discourse.

Covering all of these issues would create a rather daunting list of topics, taking up decades of Night Schools. When building our Night School, we ask ourselves about the most important intellectual tools that any attendee might leave with and use. This involves a careful evaluation of foundational ideas, central debates, and crucial political histories. Many people in DSA are working on programs like Medicare for All, and in the process, are trying to figure out how to strategically plan and refine organizing work. The Night School is a chance to step back and ask about common points of contention when considering an organizing task or strategy.
A number of our sessions—e.g. What is Social Democracy?; The Labor Movement; State Power & Class Interests; and Left Parties—create a background for the practical questions organizers are wrestling with. What are the benefits and limits of pursuing social democratic reforms? How can socialists think about and relate to the labor movement and union power? How should socialists understand the state and the ways in which we are able or unable to change it? How can the Left assert its vision through political parties? While each session can produce a standalone discussion, cumulatively, the Night School is designed to teach socialists how to think and interrogate political ideology. The final goal is a base greater than the sum of its individual components.
Many discussion-based reading groups proceed without any clear structure. That approach sometimes works well, especially in a graduate school seminar or similar meeting space where participants will show up familiar with basic discussion etiquette and endless confidence in the force of their opinions. Even in such contexts, discussions can be without direction or uninviting for less experienced participants. In the Night School, we do not just show up and shoot from the hip, but put effort into designing each of our sessions.

This work is not difficult or overly time consuming, but does require some planning. We recommend thinking about goals for each session and what sorts of conversations a reading might generate. For example, when planning a session on the Russian Revolution, one might want to do a number of different things. There are historical details that are of interest (the “what actually happened” stuff!); there are all sorts of debates about the successes and failings of the Soviet Union; and there are many questions about continued relevance of the Bolsheviks’ model for contemporary leftist organizing. A well designed session can tackle all of these issues in different ways, fostering learning and critical discussion.
We accomplish broader educational goals by carefully designing each of our sessions. Below is a list of just a few of the learning formats available. Depending on the goal of your session, you might use one or all of them for a discussion:

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

This format provides an occasion to step back from particular readings, reviewing a key term or getting a sense of the background knowledge people bring to a session. For example, before talking about economics in a session on neoliberalism, it can be helpful to ask people about what they think that term means and what general associations it has. Neoliberalism is both a specific theory and a broader cultural concept, so people will link it as much to Chicago School economists as with dietary habits.

**LECTURES**

Though we try to shy away from the “elbow patch professor” model of teaching, smaller talks (10-15 minutes or so) can provide helpful introductions to a topic. In a lecture, a speaker can contextualize a discussion by defining general concepts, explaining the theory behind our session design, or explore the historical context of a classic theoretical debate. One advantage of these formats is that they can include material that otherwise won’t fit into a reading list. In a session dealing with social democracy, you may not have time to read every German intellectual of the nineteenth century. But a speaker familiar with that literature can quickly provide useful background related to theorists like Kautsky and Luxemburg as well as organizations like the German Social Democratic Party and the Second International.
BREAKOUT GROUPS

If your meetings attract ten or more people, these can be a crucial resource. We will often reserve a portion of the session for this purpose, using a number of facilitators to lead smaller discussions. A small group can be helpful for allowing more targeted, precise discussion (say, to review a concept that might be difficult to understand). Another advantage of breakouts is that people who might be anxious speaking in front of a forty-person group will feel more comfortable in front of five to ten people. A final advantage is that they allow for the inclusion of more facilitators, giving additional leadership experience to chapter members. (See our section on Facilitators for more about this and related issues.)

DEBATES

It can often be helpful to put ideologically conflicting readings side-by-side. This approach helps bring out nuances in arguments, allowing us to consider a range of perspectives on a given issue before discussing what seems most convincing. Ultimately, this approach offers a comradely space to approach the pitched disagreements that often come up on the Left.

Because we address different kinds of topics, planners will need to combine formats in different ways in order to achieve their goals. For example, a session devoted to Lenin could approach him as a theorist, using readings to understand and historicize his arguments about the state. Alternatively, a session could focus on the political actor, using secondary texts about his role in the Bolshevik party.

In the end, careful design can completely change the way in which a topic is framed, driving discussions in productive directions and allowing all present to consider new political considerations.
This session on social democracy is a model of how we can employ different educational approaches to craft a varied meeting. The topic is “Nordic” or “Swedish” social democracy, a political program that has been debated regularly on the Left for decades. We planned a session that would not only provide people with a historical overview of Sweden’s social-democratic project, but also present some of the theoretical justifications and critiques of social democracy as a leftist program.

Our outline was as follows:

7:00 Announcements, Introductions, Overview of Session
7:15 Introductory Lecture:
A History of Social Democracy
7:30 Large Discussion: Bernstein, Evolutionary Socialism
7:50 Small Groups: Meidner, “Why the Swedish Model Failed”
8:20 Large Discussion: Miliband/Liebman, “Beyond Social Democracy”
8:40 Large Discussion:
What Lessons Does Social Democracy Hold Today?
In this session, we began with a short intro lecture about social democracy. The talk summarized early theorists such as Kautsky and Bernstein along with the Second International, but also mentioned our core question for the session: can we use older models of social democracy as a template for contemporary politics, or do we need a new model?

From there, we turned to Eduard Bernstein’s Evolutionary Socialism (1899). One of the key early theories of social democracy, Bernstein argued against Marx and other socialist theorists who wanted political revolution. He believed that socialism could grow organically within capitalist states.

We followed this text with Rudolph Meidner’s 1993 Socialist Register article “Why Did the Swedish Model Fail?” This text provided a historical overview of Sweden’s social democratic program, including a discussion of why the country struggled to retain its socialist programs. We used breakout groups for this segment, both to change up the pace of the discussion and to help work through some of the prickly economic and historical details presented in the article.

Next, we returned to the large group to discuss Ralph Miliband and Marcel Leibman’s “Beyond Social Democracy” (originally published in 1985 but reprinted in Jacobin in 2018). This text offered a critique of social democracy as a political horizon and discussed ways to overcome its model. After discussing the argument, we staged a final general discussion about whether we could model DSA’s politics on older examples of social democracy, whether we needed older revolutionary programs, or whether a third path was required.

This session constitutes a particular example of how to use readings to guide a particular kind of discussion. In this session we examined the concept of social democracy from the perspectives of theory (Bernstein), history (Meidner), and critique (Miliband & Leibman). This approach helped us flesh out theories of social democracy, but also more generally allowed us to debate political ideas and programs.
One of the things that often goes underprepared in discussion groups is facilitation. Some people instinctively lead effective discussions, but even experienced professors often spend a great deal of time coming up with a plan for how they actually teach. In our Night School, we figure out who will facilitate each session and what facilitators will do.

Facilitation is also something that does not require elaborate preparation or training. A Night School session can be led by a single person, and though many of our facilitators have teaching experience, good planning is more important than a person’s pedigree. We do recommend using as many facilitators as possible, and have found that organizers and teachers can bring experience and resources to each session.

An ideal goal is 1 facilitator for every 5-10 attendees. Using a team of facilitators has a number of advantages. Sessions led by multiple people are more varied in perspective and allow for more complicated structures like breakout groups. From a purely practical standpoint, they also minimize the preparation required of each facilitator. One person can write an introduction, another can
design reading questions, a third can prepare a general discussion, and a fourth can focus on logistics.

Whether a Night School is facilitated by one person or seven, there are many different tasks that must be considered. First, the content for each session will need to be generated. Lectures will need notes and reading discussions will need questions. When preparing our sessions, we often pool questions from all of our facilitators as they read through each text, generating a pile of resources that can be used during breakout discussions.

When planning session outlines, write clear and focused questions. Questions like “What did you think of Luxemburg?” or “can anyone quickly summarize Capital Vol. I” are usually the worst discussion starters. This is not because broad questions are unimportant. In fact, the big picture is a crucial part of session design. But people will usually be reluctant to tackle such grand issues from the get-go, and even if they do, the discussions that result will often be aimless. Reconstructive work — summarizing and interpreting basic arguments of a text — uses texts not only to practice reading comprehension, but also as a model of argumentation. Facilitators should think about what sort of focused questions bridge the gap between surface arguments and the deeper political questions they lead to.

If you do focused discussion of a reading, be mindful of specificity. Some attendees may not have read a text as closely as you, or may not remember every single detail. Some people will not have done any reading. If you do want to discuss specific parts of the text, you should allocate some time for reading a passage together as a group. Plan for a facilitator to read it, ask for a volunteer, or give everyone a minute to do so privately. Then you can ask the group what they make of the section.
Well written questions and outlines are important, but at the end of the day, all the planning in the world won’t guarantee a successful session. For this reason, it is crucial to think about in-session behavior.

The obvious major function of facilitators is to guide discussions. One simple thing that leftists often forget in planning events is to decide who will actually call on people. This leads to awkward moments where attendees do not know when it is appropriate to answer a question or who should talk first if other people want to speak. While it is not necessary to have a dedicated “caller” just to point at people when they raise their hands, someone should be clearly in charge of that duty for every segment. It is simple enough for the person asking questions to also do this task.

Facilitators should also be careful to strike a balance between active and passive direction. A major function of a leader is simply to make sure people feel comfortable. We discourage the use of “cold calling,” asking a random person to speak about an issue. If someone wishes to remain silent and listen for an entire session of the Night School, we see no reason to challenge them.

Also, while facilitators are there to keep discussions from wandering too far afield and to ask questions when organic conversation dies, it is important to leave freedom for people to voice their opinions or frame discussions in familiar terms. Keep a timeline, but do not end good conversations simply to save a minute or two.

Another common mistake that inexperienced teachers make is to move too quickly through discussion questions. Often, when asking a question, attendees might take a moment to think about a response, or will wait to see if others respond. Ask your question, then wait for a while. If people don’t eventually respond, ask the question again. Simply repeat yourself, reword what you said to clarify your
meaning, or remind people that there isn’t always a right answer. Also, be sure to let multiple people answer the same question or respond to each other. Try not to respond to every comment made by attendees. If you must speak, you often will only need to say “nice idea. Other thoughts?” A facilitator should speak as little as possible while still preserving an organized, focused discussion.

In this sense, facilitators should be attentive to the ways in which their own perspective informs a discussion. This is not to say that you should not voice opinions. In fact, pretending like discussions are apolitical can have a negative effect, leading to boring or reserved discussion. But the job of a facilitator is not to tell people what to believe. Be careful not to dominate discussion. Do not correct people. If you think a position might be controversial or inaccurate, ask the group what they think of an answer before weighing in.

Facilitation is important for running good sessions, but it has a second utility: bringing in new facilitators is one of the most immediate ways to help prepare members for activity outside of the discussion room. Facilitator roles are an opportunity for leadership and developing skills for external political work. By leading Night School sessions, one learns to work through and present political arguments, to frame political questions, to speak in front of others and command a room, and to develop an inclusive environment.

Depending on the way you structure your Night School, sessions can be an excellent opportunity to build leadership skills. This approach is mirrored in our general outlook. Typically those with less experience can start out leading small group breakout discussions. At first they might prefer to rely on facilitators who have more experience for questions and session structure. Over time, as they become more confident, they can be more involved in the design of sessions and even create content autonomously. ■
Building a Night School actually requires minimal material. You will need:

- **A Syllabus**

- **Readings**: online articles, electronic files, etc.

- **Promotional Materials**: flyers, websites, bulletin copy, etc.

- **Facilitators**

- **A Venue**

Once the syllabus is finished, gathering actual readings is easy. The quickest sources of materials are online websites that distribute texts for free. Publishers such as Dissent, Labor Notes, and Jacobin present free material covering nearly every issue of discussion on the Left today, and archives such as marxists.org contain dozens of classic books and essays by major leftist intellectuals.

Because our goal is to balance rigor and accessibility, we do recommend adding print sources where possible. University libraries will obviously provide exhaustive source materials, but even public institutions often make available excellent texts related to all sorts of historical and political topics. Such organizations will also typically have scanners that you can use to create digital copies of materials you will want to use.

One major thing we recommend is abridging your materials. There are more books by socialists than can be read in a lifetime, and you could easily spend a de-
cade reading nothing but the work of Karl Marx. More importantly, short excerpts of essays can be used to achieve great educational results. Lenin was a forceful writer, but many of his most important ideas are buried in lengthy rants about now-forgotten articles published in newspapers that have been out of print for a hundred years. Pull out key arguments or ideas that suit your educational goals.

In seeking out free or affordable venues, there are dozens of options: campus spaces, coffee shops, public libraries, churches, community centers, and left-leaning bookstores. Some organizations have been willing to donate space out of solidarity for our mission, while other spaces simply make rooms available to the general public without regard for the use. Either way, be sure to consider the intellectual and physical costs to hosts, and respect their space and their concerns. Some venues such as churches and nonprofits may not be able to endorse DSA’s political program, but will still be glad to donate space to community members.

Once you have a session designed, be sure to promote it actively. Start announcing events early so that people have time to arrange their schedules. To get the word out, circulate flyers, make a website, and use social media. Flyers can be easily designed using a program such as Acrobat Pro or Pages, which is free for Apple users.

It is also good to have a dedicated Night School section on your chapter’s homepage, where you can post reading links and other logistical details. We promote our program regularly via DSA channels such as our official Facebook and Twitter accounts. We have also created a listserv to notify members about events. We pass around a laptop for electronic sign-ins, and use that to create a member list.
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