

New Jersey Might Elect Its First Socialist Official in a Century

Via [Jacobin](#)

Joel Brooks is a longtime union organizer in Jersey City, New Jersey. After years of organizing workers to fight against their bosses for better compensation and job conditions, he now has his sights set on Jersey City Council.

Jersey City has seen decades of pro-developer government, immiserating working-class communities in order to secure extreme profits for a few corporate landlords. Beyond the routine distortions of money in politics, many municipal politicians have been found guilty of outright pay-to-play corruption.

Brooks is running to represent Ward B, Jersey City's West Side. Ward B is a working-class district with high union density and racial and national diversity. Brooks is running on a platform of permanent affordable housing, a municipal Green New Deal, good union jobs, and a public safety agenda that focuses on stabilizing rather than upending people's lives.

Oren Schweitzer sat down with Brooks to discuss his campaign and how he hopes to build working-class power in Jersey City.

Oren Schweitzer: Why are you running for City Council?

Joel Brooks: I'm running for City Council to represent the 99 percent of the West Side of Jersey City. Ward B is a majority working-class district, and residents are a majority people of color. About three-quarters of the district's household income

is under eighty-five thousand dollars a year. There has been a lot of development that has come to Jersey City. Working-class people need to share in the resources that are being brought by corporate developers and corporate landlords who are not paying their fair share in taxes.

You were a longtime labor organizer before running for office. How did you get involved in the labor movement? How did your experiences in the labor movement bring you to socialism, and how do they inform your campaign?

I grew up in a union house. My dad is a retired postal clerk, APWU [American Postal Workers Union]. He brought me to union meetings when I was a kid, and brought me to work for take your kid to work day. The postal plant he worked in was very old school and they had a union steward, I think on paid time, doing union work. He was in a cage, and my dad said, "That's the union cage, and that's my shop steward and he protects our rights." When I got to college, I knew what a union was. I knew that a union provided our family with economic security and gave my dad dignity and a voice on the job.

I got involved in politics through the Howard Dean presidential campaign – yes, I'm that old – because he was against the war in Iraq. I took a trip to New Hampshire where I saw different unions canvassing for him, and I kind of put two and two together and said, "I want to be a union organizer." I soon graduated from school, and I've been a labor organizer ever since.

Part of my training as an organizer was crystalizing that there are two sides: workers and the boss. The way I was trained is that a union is an organization of workers that fights harder than the boss to build power and to improve material conditions and people's lives on the job. In helping workers do that, I've seen bosses do some pretty despicable stuff, from threatening international graduate students at NYU who were on strike with the loss of their scholarships to

calling ICE on their own workers three days before Christmas during an organizing campaign.

That experience really clarified for me that there is a ruling class in this country, and their interests are to have workers be disempowered and disorganized. I view worker organization into the labor movement as part of building democratic socialism.

Can you tell me a bit about Ward?

Ward B is affectionately known as the West Side. It's almost like the Queens of Jersey City. Percentage-wise, it's plurality African American, plus Latinos of all different nationalities, folks who have recently come from the Arabic-speaking Middle East, Pakistan, India, and older white ethnics who stuck around in Jersey City.

The West Side is highly dense in union membership. Union members include people who work in and commute to New York City and people who work in New Jersey. It's a really working-class district, and that's part of the beauty of it.

On West Side Avenue we have all kinds of different mom-and-pop stores, from Filipino restaurants to halal butchers, serving the community in the immediate area. We also have two colleges: Saint Peter's University and New Jersey City University, which is just outside of Ward B.

What does the political status quo look like in Jersey City?

The political status quo in Jersey City looks like chronically underfunded public schools, and ten-plus years of real estate developers paying pennies on the dollar in PILOT [Payment In Lieu Of Taxes] payments. It also looks like the Democratic Party not allowing any kind of independent, progressive, or democratic socialist voices to rise up through the Democratic Party primary system.

What that means is that voters are tuned out. A vast majority of people do not vote in off-year local elections. A majority of Jersey City did vote in the presidential election. When they see city council members being arrested for corruption, which has happened in Ward B more than a few times in the last ten or fifteen years; when they see their kids going to schools in eighty- or one-hundred-year-old buildings that don't have air conditioning or drinkable water; when they see flood after flood like we just saw with [Hurricane] Ida and no meaningful changes to infrastructure, people kind of just tune out, go to work, hang with their family, and do their thing.

Part of what we are doing in our campaign is trying to engage voters, especially working-class voters. We're saying to them, "No, you do have power, and one way you can demonstrate your power is to vote for change."

You're not taking any corporate donations and are fully funded by small donors. What has been the effect of corporate and real estate money on the politics of Jersey City and the lives of Jersey City residents?

The current mayor is running for a third term, and if you look at his campaign finance returns you'll see a laundry list of people who do business with the city. For instance there's a developer in Jersey City who also owns a nonunion plumbing and sewer business, and he does business with the city, and is buying up land to develop market-rate and luxury apartment buildings. Meanwhile his daughter, who had no fiscal income at the time, made a maximum donation to the current administration.

There are pay-to-play laws municipally and statewide, but the current administration is still taking money from developers, from people related to them, and from people with interests aligned with unrelenting development.

When the voices of people who are buying up large swaths of

property to develop market-rate and luxury buildings are the ones that matter, or when public employees feel compelled to donate to sitting politicians or establishment candidates for job security, working-class voters can feel like they can't fight City Hall. Our campaign is saying, "Actually, we can." And we can do that by organizing, by exercising power first at the ballot box, and then continuing to organize for what the working class of the West Side of Jersey City needs.

What kind of Jersey City do you envision?

It's going to take a lot of work, but I think we can have a Jersey City where development will happen but there will also be permanent affordability with expanded and real rent, and where we don't have luxury developers like the Kushner family paying sixty-five cents on the dollar while working-class people are paying dollar for dollar in homeowners' taxes.

I envision Jersey City as a healthy place, where we can pass a municipal Green New Deal, where we can get people into union apprenticeships and put folks to work in good union jobs retrofitting public buildings. I envision a safe Jersey City. Public safety is a real issue here, and we do have escalating gun violence. I subscribe to the Larry Krasner worldview that someone with a good job and an affordable place to live is most likely not competing for resources and not committing violent crimes.

We have grinding generational poverty in some parts of Jersey City, and the solution is not a ten-story market-rate apartment building. The solution is providing what working-class people need to survive and thrive.

What's been the role of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in your campaign? What's it been like running as an open democratic socialist?

We kicked off our campaign in early February, and DSA endorsed in March. DSA volunteers have been the spine, the arms, the

legs, the brain, the heart, and the guts of our campaign. That energy and that solidarity has enabled us to get voters to know who we are, which is very important when you're running as a challenger.

In terms of running as a democratic socialist, it has certainly become easier after Bernie [Sanders]. I was very fortunate to work on Bernie 2016 and I saw what a universal message for working-class people can do, how that can draw folks in who would not otherwise identify as democratic socialists.

That's the kind of campaign we're running here in Jersey City, and we're starting to catch fire. We've raised a little over fifty-three thousand dollars, we've knocked on between fifteen and twenty thousand doors, we've talked to hundreds of voters, and we're sixty-two days away from the election. We're scrapping, and we have a real shot to win this election because of DSA.

Do you think that running in a nonpartisan election gives greater opportunities to distinguish yourself from the Democratic Party corporate establishment?

We have a unique system in New Jersey where in the party primaries, the advantage of being the party-endorsed candidate is almost statistically insurmountable. I think it's a 30 to 35 percent advantage.

When you go and vote, especially in a presidential year, it's like Joe Biden going all the way down to assistant deputy dog catcher. It appears to the regular Democratic voter that Joe Biden is endorsing the assistant deputy dog catcher, when in fact he doesn't even know who he is. That ballot structure has become an almost impossible obstacle to outorganize. Folks talk about outorganizing voter suppression in the South, and it's not a one-for-one analogy, but trying to outorganize the party line in New Jersey is very difficult.

Running in a nonpartisan election means that we don't have to contend with the line. When voters go in to vote, the municipal section of the ballot has slogans, it doesn't have parties. It would be a disadvantage to run in a primary, so it is a slight advantage to run in a nonpartisan election.

What's the slogan you're using on the ballot?

West Side for All.

How do you hope to use your race and election to build working-class power in North Jersey?

If we can win this race, it will be a real breakthrough for the Left in New Jersey. We've had some really scrappy challengers in party primaries and also in nonpartisan elections throughout the state, but if we win, I would be the [first open democratic socialist](#) to hold office in New Jersey in probably a century.

Being a voice in office for working-class people is not a substitute for organizing, but it's a good complement. And if we do win, I do want to continue organizing, because that's what builds power.

If we're trying to pass a municipal Green New Deal, we're going to have to organize for it. We can't just advocate for it and think that the best idea is going to win the day. Just like how [Bernie is going to Indiana](#) to campaign for the budget, we might need to have a citywide campaign for continuing to fully fund our public schools, because this last year was the first year we had a fully funded budget in some time.

If we win, we're going to have to continue to organize and build power on the West Side of Jersey City, to amplify any organization that already exists, and to use that momentum to win good policy that addresses the material needs of working-class people.