

# The anti-socialist politics of the Democratic Socialists of America

Tom Hall  
3 August 2017

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) will open its national convention today in Chicago. Despite the populist and left-sounding rhetoric that will be on display in the various speeches, roundtables, workshops and resolutions, the DSA is a pro-capitalist organization steeped in a tradition of anti-communism and bitterly opposed to the political independence of the working class.

The meeting is taking place as the various ostensibly “left” organizations that operate in and around the Democratic Party attempt to grapple with the deep disgust with that big business party among workers and young people, which was strikingly revealed in the Democrats’ 2016 election debacle.

The political radicalization and growth of anti-capitalist sentiment found an initial expression during the Democratic Party primary contest in mass support for the self-described “socialist” Senator Bernie Sanders, who claimed to be leading a “political revolution” while actually working to channel opposition back behind the Democrats and their eventual nominee, Hillary Clinton.

Clinton ran a pro-war campaign and evinced indifference to the questions of poverty and social inequality that dominated popular sentiment during the Democratic primary campaign. With Clinton widely despised in the working class as a personification of the corrupt political status quo, her candidacy produced a sharp drop in turnout among traditional Democratic voters and, in economically devastated former industrial states, a shift to Trump, who presented himself as the anti-establishment alternative, by a section of low-income workers who had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012. Studies have shown that anti-war sentiment in these regions and hostility to Clinton’s anti-Russia agitation also played a major role.

The alienation from the Democrats has only deepened since the election, with the Democratic Party basing its opposition to the new administration not on Trump’s attacks on immigrants and democratic rights more broadly, his assault on social programs, or his appointment of fascists and Wall Street billionaires to top White House and cabinet posts, but rather on his reluctance to continue the confrontational policy against Russia initiated under Obama. Approval ratings for the Democrats have actually fallen at a faster rate than for the Republicans, according to a Gallup poll released in May.

Nothing is more frightening to the pseudo-left than the discrediting of the Democratic Party, which raises the specter of a break with bourgeois politics by the working class and the formation of a new, socialist working class movement. Organizations and publications such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO), Socialist Alternative and *Jacobin* are discussing some kind of political regroupment, either within the Democratic Party or nominally independent of it, to achieve their shared goal of shoring up and refurbishing the political credibility of that party and of capitalist politics overall. Toward this end, they continue to promote Sanders, who claims to be leading a “political revolution” to reform the Democratic Party.

Within this reactionary political milieu, the DSA’s star is rising. It is seen as an organization that could play a central role in these plans. Thus, the ISO had DSA-aligned *Jacobin* magazine co-sponsor its annual conference for the first time this summer, with DSA vice-chairman and *Jacobin* editor-in-chief Bhaskar Sunkara appearing as a featured speaker.

Socialist Alternative, which openly functioned as a faction of the Sanders campaign last year, is now prostrating itself before the DSA. It is calling on it to form a new “broad-left” political formation into which Socialist Alternative would liquidate itself. Socialist Alternative justifies this line by claiming that the DSA has shifted from its anti-communist, social democratic foundations since Occupy Wall Street in 2011 and the entry of the group around Sunkara into the organization.

In fact, few pseudo-left organizations, with the possible exception of Socialist Alternative itself, are as closely integrated into and function so openly as a faction of the Democratic Party as the DSA. The DSA’s top leadership includes Democratic Party luminaries, among them union bureaucrats such as Dolores Huerta (who supported Clinton over Sanders in the Democratic primaries) and celebrity intellectuals such as academic Cornel West and feminist writer and former CIA collaborator Gloria Steinem. The DSA endorsed Hillary Clinton in the general election in all but name, attempting to camouflage its position by calling for a “social movement” to defeat Trump in key swing states. After the election, it endorsed Minnesota Congressman Keith Ellison in the contest for the chair of the Democratic National Committee.

Through its membership in the Socialist International, the DSA is affiliated with such organizations as the British Labour Party, the French Socialist Party and the German Social Democrats, all of which have carried out savage attacks on the working class and participated in neo-colonial wars in the Middle East and Africa while in government.

The DSA of today cannot be separated from its history. The predecessor organization of the DSA, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), emerged out of a split within the Socialist Party of America in 1972. The latter organization expelled the American supporters of the Russian Revolution from its ranks in 1919.

The founders of the DSOC, Michael Harrington in particular, had entered the Socialist Party more than a decade before 1972 as part of the tendency led by Max Shachtman, who split from the Trotskyist movement in 1940. The Shachtmanites, bending to the pressure of bourgeois public opinion in the wake of the Stalin-Hitler Pact, refused to uphold the defense of the Soviet Union. By 1950, this group was defending American imperialism in the Korean War and by 1961 Shachtman was publicly supporting the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Such was Harrington’s anti-communist pedigree.

By 1972, Shachtman had essentially captured the rump of the nearly moribund Socialist Party. Harrington now criticized his mentor from the left. He drew close to the liberal wing of the anti-communist trade union bureaucracy, the Reutherite officialdom of the United Auto Workers, in particular.

From the beginning, DSOC's orientation, in the DSA's own words, was toward "building a strong coalition among progressive trade unionists, civil rights and feminist activists and the 'new politics' left-liberals in the McGovern wing of the Democrats." Its fusion in 1982 with an organizational remnant of the 1960s generation of student protesters to form the DSA was a reflection of the latter's shift to the right and abandonment of its former radical pretenses, which made the anti-communist foundations of the DSA attractive.

The rejection by the DSA of principled politics is such that it does not have a program or platform upon which its political activity is, at least nominally, based. However, a review of the DSA's "national strategy document," published last June but re-posted on the DSA website in advance of this week's convention, demonstrates the anti-communist and nationalist orientation of this middle-class organization.

The title of the document, "Resistance Rising: Socialist Strategy in the Age of Political Revolution," is itself significant. The use of the term "political revolution" reflects the DSA's promotion of Bernie Sanders and the illusion that the Democrats can be transformed into a "people's party" through popular pressure. Lest there be any doubt on this, the banner linking to the statement on the DSA's website features a photo of a Sanders rally. The DSA's support for the term used by Sanders above all signifies its opposition to social revolution, to a genuine social transformation that would bring the working class to power. Instead, like Sanders, it seeks to "purify" capitalism.

## Radical democracy vs. socialism

The DSA statement is suffused with identity politics. One sub-heading calls for "Building Multiracial, Intentionally Intersectional Coalitions." At several points, the DSA engages in self-flagellation for being "dominated by white activists."

It promotes the reactionary Democratic Party narrative that Trump's Electoral College victory was the result of the racism of the white working class. It states that "appeals to racism and fear will continue to gain traction among economically and socially insecure white voters--particularly men, who face the erosion of traditional gender prominence due to the gains of the feminist movement."

From a theoretical standpoint, the most significant element of the DSA's document is its rejection of the Marxist theory of the state as an instrument of class rule, and its substitution in its stead of a nebulous, non-class notion of socialism as "radical democracy."

"[The] DSA believes that the fight for democratic socialism is one and the same as the fight for radical democracy, which we understand as the freedom of all people to determine all aspects of their lives to the greatest extent possible," the document states. "Our vision entails nothing less than the radical democratization of all areas of life, not least of which is the economy. This simply means that democracy would be expanded beyond the election of political officials to include the democratic management of all businesses by the workers who comprise them and by the communities in which they operate."

The DSA's "radical democracy" would also include changes to the method of electing members of Congress, the abolition of the Senate and the establishment of vague "local participatory institutions."

The DSA's use of the term "democracy" is a non-class abstraction. Its call for "industrial democracy" leaves out precisely who will be participating in this "democracy" and in what capacity, not to mention who will actually own the means of production. In fact, the DSA's conception of "radical democracy" means little more than the establishment of joint union-management boards, co-ops nominally

owned by the workers, and other such initiatives that serve only to bind the workers hand-and-foot to the bosses.

Since the emergence of scientific socialism as first elaborated by Marx and Engels, socialists have explained that the state is an instrument of class rule. This is no less true for democratic governments than for authoritarian ones. In fact, socialists have always understood the bourgeois democratic state to be the form of government that best suits the needs of the class dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, which is why, as a general historical rule, the oldest and most established capitalist countries developed some form of democratic parliamentary system.

If, nevertheless, the ruling class in all of the old capitalist democracies is turning toward more openly authoritarian methods, this is the product of the massive concentration of wealth, which is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. The rule of the bourgeoisie is increasingly incompatible with the maintenance of past social reforms, and the crisis of capitalism is assuming revolutionary dimensions. As Lenin explained, a revolutionary situation requires not only that the masses cannot continue to live in the old way, but also that the ruling class can no longer rule in the old way.

The class character of the state, even the most "democratic," explains why socialists since the time of Marx have insisted that the working class cannot "capture" the existing state machinery through elections, but must smash it and replace it with a state of its own, established on the basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat, understood in the Marxist sense of "dictatorship" as the political domination of a particular class. The working class, which by virtue of its relationship to the means of production is the antithesis of private property, takes power by establishing genuinely democratic forms of rule. The broad masses of people are for the first time actively involved in the management of social life, and economic policy is determined by social need, not private profit.

The DSA explicitly states that its vision of a "democratic socialist society" does not include the disappearance of class antagonisms. "It should always be remembered, however, that like every other form of society, a democratic socialist society cannot produce total social harmony," the statement declares. "Such a society will always have to navigate among the competing claims of different groups and democratic political institutions will always be needed to arbitrate and mediate such conflict. Democratic socialism, that is, will not be the utopia that many socialists of old imagined."

Instead of the alleged "utopia" of an end to class exploitation, achieved through a revolutionary movement led by a Marxist party, the DSA promotes the reactionary utopia of "democratic socialism" enacted through the Democratic Party and the reform of capitalism. "The nature of our electoral activism will vary based on local and political conditions," the DSA writes. "But it will include supporting progressive and socialist candidates running for office, *usually in Democratic primaries or as Democrats in general elections*, but also in support of independent socialist and other third-party campaigns outside of the Democratic Party (emphasis added)."

In other words, the DSA will throw its support either behind Democratic Party candidates or the campaigns of third-party appendages of the Democrats such as the Green Party.

## The DSA's anticommunist politics

The slogan of "radical democracy" is consistent with the anti-communism that forms the bedrock of the DSA's politics. The justification for the DSA's opposition to the Russian Revolution is that it destroyed "democracy" by overthrowing the bourgeois Provisional

Government, which jailed and shot revolutionaries and continued Russia's involvement in the slaughter of the First World War.

The DSA equates the October Revolution, the most genuinely democratic revolution in history, in which the masses themselves took control of their own destiny, with totalitarianism and the crimes of Stalin, whose bureaucracy usurped power and destroyed workers' democracy in the Soviet Union. In order to accomplish this counterrevolutionary task, Stalin murdered the entire generation of old Bolsheviks who had led the revolution, concentrating the full wrath of his police apparatus on Leon Trotsky and his supporters, who represented the conscious Marxist and internationalist opposition to the Stalin regime.

The DSA's hostility to the Russian Revolution and its rejection of the Marxist assertion that the class struggle of the working class leads inevitably to the dictatorship of the proletariat is a practical political as well as a theoretical question. It is at the very core of the DSA's opposition to the fight for socialist politics within the working class and its character as a counter-revolutionary organization.

Social democracy, of which the DSA is part, has upheld and defended the capitalist dictatorship over the working class for more than a century. This was definitively established with the support given by all of the major social democratic parties to their own national bourgeoisies in the first imperialist world war that began in 1914. Since the suppression of the 1918 German Revolution and the murder of the Marxist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg at the hands of the German Social Democracy, social democratic parties in power have not hesitated to use state violence to crush workers' uprisings and rescue the capitalist class. If the DSA is given the opportunity, it will not hesitate to do the same in the United States.

Bhaskar Sunkara, in a column published in the *New York Times* two months ago, expressed the hostility of the DSA to the legacy of the Russian Revolution when he claimed that Lenin, once he returned to Russia in April of 1917, "set into motion the events that led to Stalin's gulags." To return socialism to "radical democracy," Sunkara argued, it was necessary to return to the "early days of the Second International."

His reference to the "early days" of the Second International, as opposed to its collapse as a socialist organization at the beginning of World War I, cannot conceal the fact that Sunkara is promoting the very aspects that led to its betrayal of socialism. This means the domination of its day-to-day political activity by campaigns for reform, rather than Social Democracy's positive contribution to the promotion and development of Marxism, which was carried forward after 1914 by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, and put into practice in the October Revolution.

Sunkara's article, it should be noted, met with enthusiastic support from the ISO on its *Socialist Worker* website.

The DSA's embrace of the "democratic" imperialist state is consistent with the complete silence of its strategy statement on American imperialism and the danger of war. The DSA is not merely indifferent to this question, however. Along with virtually all of the other pseudo-left organizations, it supports and identifies with the criminal wars waged by American imperialism.

The DSA has posted only two statements on its website in 2017 about foreign policy. While they are meant to appear as criticisms of US policy in the Middle East, they make clear the DSA's actual support for the US war for regime-change in Syria, which has displaced millions and killed hundreds of thousands. After formally condemning the Trump administration's cruise missile attack on a Syrian air base in a statement published in April, the DSA hastens to add that "[t]he DSA has also supported from spring 2011 onwards the massive and democratic Syrian uprising against the brutal Assad regime."

The statement treats as good coin the putative justification for the attack--exposed as a lie by journalist Seymour Hersh--that the Syrian

government carried out gas attacks against civilians. (An article published in *Jacobin* denounced Hersh's article.) The DSA attempts to provide its pro-imperialist line with an anti-imperialist gloss by absurdly claiming that the US has "in effect" sided with the Assad regime and the Russian military. It does not attempt to reconcile the obvious contradiction between supposed US support for Assad and the cruise missile attack on the Syrian airbase.

The DSA statement places chief responsibility for the Syrian civil war on Russia and Iran, calling on the US to "engage in the necessary diplomacy to press Russia, Iran and Hezbollah to cease their military aid to the Assad dictatorship, as well as end United States and Gulf State funding of internal Syrian combatants." This advice to the State Department is a clear signal to the American bourgeoisie of its support for US imperialism's war drive and the escalating campaign against Russia, which raises the specter of nuclear war.

The DSA argues that the "democratic" imperialist powers in Western Europe are more progressive than the workers' government established by the October Revolution. Thus, it claims that the reformist regimes in postwar Europe and America, not the establishment of the first workers' state in history, "represents the high-water mark of working class strength" and "significant progress toward a democratic socialist transition."

The DSA's nostalgic tribute to the postwar welfare state underscores the delusory and utopian character of its entire perspective. It promotes the idea that the reformist programs of that period can be revived, under conditions where, for forty years, the bourgeoisie throughout the world, and above all the United States, has been clawing back every social concession won by workers through more than a century of struggle.

A return to previous conditions is impossible because the driving force behind this social counterrevolution is not bad "neoliberal" policy, as the DSA claims, but the objective crisis of the capitalist system. What the DSA is really mourning is the longstanding decline of American capitalism, whose untrammelled dominance provided the foundation for the temporary stabilization of world capitalism after the Second World War and the ability of the bourgeoisie in the advanced countries to dispense modest reforms and engage in a policy of relative class compromise.

Such blindness to the objective roots of this historic decline and lack of any objective analysis of the crisis of American and world capitalism are characteristic of the politics of the DSA and the pseudo-left as a whole.

The DSA's promotion of the postwar era as a model demonstrates precisely what it means when it refers, at the beginning of its document, to the "game changing" opportunities it sees for "leftists and progressives." It is not referring to the growing shift to the left within the working class and the increasing alignment of workers' experiences with the perspective of socialist revolution. Rather, with the crisis of capitalism having discredited all of the traditional institutions of the existing system, it sees itself and the pseudo-left as a whole as playing a more prominent and active role in diverting and smothering social opposition, including in positions of state power. Like Syriza in Greece, whose rise to power it cites as an example of the "left's" re-emergence, it envisions the American pseudo-left being called upon to carry out historic betrayals.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**