The class issues behind the Democratic Socialists of America's electoral gains

Tom Hall
14 November 2017

Last week's state and local elections produced a number of noteworthy results for candidates representing the middle-class organizations that operate around the Democratic Party.

The most significant electoral victories went to candidates backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which announced on its website after the elections that 15 of its candidates, running mostly as Democrats, had won their races, bringing to 35 the total number of DSA-backed officeholders.

Most of these seats were in local government in relatively small towns. However, a number of DSA members and DSA-endorsed candidates won more high-profile races. DSA member Singh Perez won a seat on the city council of Knoxville, the third-largest city in Tennessee. Larry Krasner, a candidate endorsed by both the DSA and Black Lives Matter, was elected District Attorney for Philadelphia.

In one of the biggest upsets, DSA member Lee Carter, running as a Democrat, ousted Jackson Miller, the Republican whip and second-highest ranking Republican in the Virginia House of Delegates. Republicans sought unsuccessfully to red-bait Carter by sending mailouts comparing Carter to Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao.

In Minneapolis, Socialist Alternative member Ginger Jentzen narrowly lost a City Council race to Democrat Steve Fletcher. Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant has sat on the Seattle City Council since 2014.

The vote for these candidates reflects a growing interest in socialist politics. However, tendencies such as the Democratic Socialists of America and Socialist Alternative are not genuine socialists but pseudo-left groups based on privileged layers of the upper-middle class. They are not only distant from the concerns and motivations of the working class but organically hostile towards and fearful of the emergence of a genuinely socialist movement of the working class which breaks from the straitjacket of capitalist politics.

In the United States, this leads the pseudo-left to function as political satellites of, or factions within, the Democratic Party, and to seek to present this party of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus as a party of reform, or at least one which is amenable to popular pressure. This generally takes the form of making nominal criticisms of the Democratic Party "establishment" while promoting or participating in left-populist "insurgent" campaigns such as last year's presidential primary campaign of Bernie Sanders. In fact, the right-wing policies of the Democratic "establishment" expresses its social essence as a party of the ruling class.

The Democrats, for their part, are highly conscious of the role that the pseudo-left plays. There is a growing realization among sections of the party that their electoral fate, and the stability of the two-party system, may depend on their ability to integrate the pseudo-left even more closely into Democratic Party politics. Last month, a group of Democratic Party operatives aligned with Senator Bernie Sanders released a report on the party's debacle in the 2016 elections, which argued that the party should "build relationships with social movements" and groups that call themselves socialists in order to capture the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment among young people.

The election of DSA members, who ran, in keeping with the longstanding policy of the DSA, as Democrats or independents, proceeded along these lines. For example, despite the fact that the Virginia Democratic Party declined to campaign for Carter, an arrangement which allowed him to posture as an "anti-establishment" figure, the three largest donors to

© World Socialist Web Site

Carter's campaign were the state Democratic Party and two Democratic Party-aligned political action committees (PACs), according to *Slate* .

One of these, a super-PAC called "Forward Majority," has intimate ties to the former Obama administration and has two sitting Democratic congressmen and the Democratic governor of Colorado as honorary co-chairs. David Cohen, the co-founder and executive director of Foward Majority, was a major figure in Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. "For more than 15 years, David has led winning political and advocacy campaigns for candidates, progressive organizations and Fortune 25 companies," the super-PAC states on its website.

In an interview with the DSA-aligned *Jacobin* magazine, Carter defended his decision to run as a Democrat, declaring that running as an independent would have been "prohibitive," adding, "it made the most sense to me to build a coalition of groups focused on the things that the Democratic Party's voter base and the Democratic Socialists of America have in common."

Carter boasted that his campaign relied upon "member-led Democratic organizations as well as labor unions and DSA."

It is also significant that Carter, a former marine, did not raise the question of war, either in the *Jacobin* interview or in his campaign, in spite of the fact that the election took place amidst the Trump administration's war drive against North Korea, in a district located in the Washington, DC area only a few short miles from the Pentagon and the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. To do so would implicate the Democratic Party, which spent two full terms at war under Obama and has been agitating for a more confrontational approach by Trump against Russia.

Other pseudo-left organizations, such as Socialist Alternative, ran campaigns which were nominally independent, or even against Democratic Party nominees. In Columbus, Ohio, a slate of candidates called the Yes We Can Coalition, which was backed by the Working Families Party, ran against Democratic incumbents in the city council and local school board.

However, this does not lessen their basic political orientation to the Democratic Party. Socialist Alternative enjoys close ties to the Democratic Party and practically dissolved itself into the Bernie Sanders campaign.

The local chapter of the International Socialist Organization, which generally does not run candidates in elections, declined to endorse the Yes We Can Coalition (named after Obama's 2008 campaign slogan), citing the latter's "strategic orientation toward the Democratic Party, rather than clear-cut independence." At the same time, they effectively endorsed and promoted their politics, making clear that their actual differences are of a tactical character.

The diverging electoral tactics between the DSA on the one hand and Socialist Alternative and the ISO on the other are debates within the pseudo left over whether it is more expedient to run openly as a faction of the Democratic Party, or constitute themselves as nominally separate organizations while functioning as de facto tendencies within the Democratic Party.

The basic question for socialists has always been to mobilize the working class on the basis of an independent, revolutionary and international program in opposition to *all* capitalist parties, including its nominally left factions. In the United States, this has entailed a lengthy struggle to break the working class from the Democrats, which in an earlier period were able to gain mass support because of their reputation as a party of social reform.

Now, under conditions where the Democrats long ago repudiated that program and are widely hated among American workers and young people, the pseudo-left is stepping in to try and revive these shopworn illusions, in one form or another. This confirms their pro-capitalist, anti-working class and anti-socialist perspective.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site