

# Young Democratic Socialists of America conference: Propping up the Democratic Party

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On February 17 and 18, the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) held their annual national convention in Washington D.C., under the headline, “Building Socialist Power Beyond the Campus.” Just over 350 young people attended the conference, several times higher than in previous years.

The DSA has grown more than six-fold since the election of Donald Trump, from 5,000 to over 32,000 members, many of them young people. There is a growing interest amongst workers and youth in socialism. As was evident at the conference, the aim of the DSA is to turn young people interested in socialism into foot-soldiers for the Democrats or organizers for the anti-working class trade unions.

The first plenary session, “Democratic Socialism’s Strategy for Trump’s Second Year,” set the tone for the rest of the conference. This panel featured Amirah Sequeira, a lobbyist for the trade union National Nurses United; Jacquelyn Smith, former election campaign manager to Lee Carter, a Democratic member of the Virginia House of Delegates; and Bianca Cunningham, a low-level official in the Communication Workers of America (CWA), who worked on the bargaining team of the sellout of the 2016 Verizon workers’ strike.

Sequeira gave the first report, consisting of a call-to-action around Bernie Sanders’ Medicare For All bill. “We need to build a serious grassroots movement across this country, and we hope that you will be a part of it,” she announced. “There are going to be state campaigns for Medicare For All bills in states across this country. We are going to work to pass H.R.676 [Expanded & Improved Medicare for All Act], formally introduced by Representative John Conyers, and S.1804 [Medicare for All Act of 2017] in the Senate by Mr. Bernie Sanders,” she continued.

During an address concerning “electoral work,” Smith elaborated DSA strategy under a tactic she referred to as “running where the machine is weak.” “Running an insurgent socialist campaign in a Democratic Party

stronghold puts us at a significant disadvantage in brutal primary elections, often against well-funded incumbents,” she said, “who have already locked up union support.” Instead, the DSA intends to focus on Republican-held districts with substantial working-class populations who “have long since been abandoned by the party establishment.”

“These communities are especially receptive to leftist messaging and real grassroots campaigns,” Smith said. In particular, she stressed the importance of “targeting low-income and low-turnout communities that the establishment refuses to prioritize. They’re just uninterested and they think that they’re lost causes.”

To this effect, Smith’s speech made clear the DSA’s hope to re-inspire illusions in the Democrats amongst workers and youth. After witnessing decades of deindustrialization, cuts to social programs, and widespread impoverishment, the working class by and large views the Democratic Party with justifiable contempt.

The DSA leadership hopes that, by bringing these disaffected workers back into its fold, they will be rewarded with power and influence of their own. “You want to find a race that you can actually make a significant impact on. Because when you can make a significant impact, the elected officials, you are going to have more influence with them,” she explained.

Bianca Cunningham expressed the same sentiments with regard to swelling the ranks of the trade unions with young workers. “Unions are still fundamentally workers organizations at the end of the day,” she claimed. “Whether the leadership has gone astray or not, they can always be replaced through elections.” While on the one hand, Cunningham was forced to note that “the Democratic Party is a capitalist organization and is always going to be fundamentally capitalist,” her solution consisted of “taking union jobs” as “a way to change the party.”

“Take a union job and let’s be the leadership we want to

replace,” she said. “We don’t want to necessarily be bureaucrats, but we want to be in a position of power so that we can make the right decisions and change the union from the inside.” This statement underscores the desire of individuals like Cunningham to boost Democratic votes and expand the unions’ dues base in return for well-heeled positions in the party establishment and trade union bureaucracy.

The assertion by Cunningham that the unions are still “workers organizations” was an effort to revive support in organizations that are working deliberately and systematically to sabotage any emergence of class struggle, as they are doing now in West Virginia.

Only a week after the YDSA conference, a lawyer for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees explicitly articulated the real role of the unions. In arguments before the Supreme Court in the case of *Janus v. AFSCME*, David Frederick declared that “union security is the tradeoff for no strikes.” Without the unions, he said, there would be “an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country.”

A breakout session titled “Democratic Socialism on the Ballot,” chaired by National Political Committee members Chris Riddiough and Christian Bowe, dealt exclusively with the question of working within the Democratic Party. The decision was treated by the leadership as a *fait accompli*, for which there was no room for further discussion. Still, the speakers were forced to acknowledge the existence of conflict within the DSA over this question.

“Let’s talk about the elephant in the room, or perhaps I should say the donkey,” Riddiough said. “The debate over whether to work in the Democratic Party or to support Democratic candidates and or run as socialists in the Democratic Party has been raging on the left for decades.”

“For some, this is a question of principle,” she continued. “‘The Democratic Party is a captive of the capitalist neoliberals and can’t be salvaged,’ they would say. ‘We need a party of the working class, of labor.’ Now I think that some of that is true, but I think however that to ‘DP or not DP’ is really a tactical question.”

“We often think of parties as ideologically based,” she continued, “but in the US that’s really not true. The Democratic Party stands for nothing. But we can also look at it as an opportunity—an opportunity to move the party to the left.”

The reality is the opposite. The Democratic Party represents the interests of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus. It is a party that acts on behalf of a parasitic minority of the super-rich. It is a party of militarism, which is presently basing its opposition to Trump entirely on the demand that the White House take more

aggressive action against Russia. If workers view it with anger and disgust, it is because it is this party that is responsible for the gutting of entire industries and the devastation of communities across vast regions of the United States.

The conference also sought to bolster the identity politics used by the Democrats to divide the working class and subordinate it to the interests of the upper middle class. White, male workers and youth were repeatedly urged to “take a backseat” in political discussion. Speakers warned the audience that any attempt to raise the consciousness of the working class was “paternalistic” and indicative of “privilege.” Instead, the speakers instructed attendees to “meet people where they’re at.”

During the second plenary session, “Capitalism Is The Crisis,” policy analyst Matt Bruenig presented data that showed that social inequality followed a similar pattern across all ethnic groups in the United States. For making this basic and irrefutable point, he was roundly criticized by individuals in the audience and on the panel.

David Thurston, a member of the steering committee of the Movement for Black Lives—which received \$100 million from the Ford Foundation last year—declared, “Any analysis of anti-capitalism that doesn’t put white supremacy at its center, is bound to be utterly pointless and irrelevant.” In other words, any statement that challenges the narrative that the principal division in society is race—not class—is to be politically suppressed.

More important than what was said at the conference, however, is what was not said. The meeting, ostensibly held in opposition to capitalism and in favor of socialism, made no attempt at any analysis of the current political and economic crisis. There was no mention of the developing crisis in the stock market, which saw the Dow wildly gyrate at the beginning of the month.

Most significantly, there was no reference to the growing danger of a third world war. The extraordinary conflict raging within the American capitalist state was ignored, as was the current wave of anti-Russian hysteria and conspiracy theories from the Democratic Party and the capitalist press. Internet censorship of left-wing, anti-war and progressive websites was likewise passed by in silence.

To address any of these issues would expose the character of the Democratic Party, of which the DSA is an auxiliary faction.



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