

How the DSA bolsters the Democratic Party establishment: The case of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

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The New York City media is giving substantial attention to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who is running in the Democratic primary in the 14th Congressional District as a “democratic socialist” against incumbent Joe Crowley, a key figure in the Democratic congressional leadership. The primary election takes place next Tuesday, June 26.

Ocasio-Cortez has centered her campaign on the need to “acknowledge that not all Democrats are the same,” attacking Crowley on the basis that he is part of the Democratic Party machine. She has also criticized Crowley for being disconnected from working class and Hispanic residents in the 14th District, which includes parts of the boroughs of Queens and the Bronx in New York City, separated by the East River and connected only by the Bronx/Whitestone Bridge.

In conventional terms of money and endorsements, Crowley is a heavy favorite to win the primary. He has raised more than \$2.7 million in campaign funds, nearly 25 times the \$115,653 raised by Ocasio-Cortez, according to reports filed with the Federal Election Commission at the end of March. He also has the full support of the Democratic Party machine, which he heads, as chair of the Queens County Democratic Party. He has held his congressional seat for 20 years, and was last challenged in a Democratic primary in 2004.

Crowley is also chair of the House Democratic Caucus, putting him fourth in the Democratic Party leadership in the House of Representatives, and making the 56-year-old a potential successor to House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi. The top three Democrats in the House are all at least 20 years older than Crowley: Pelosi is 78, Minority Whip Steny Hoyer is 79, and Assistant Minority Leader Jim Clyburn is 77.

The race between Ocasio-Cortez and Crowley to some extent echoes the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries, with Ocasio-Cortez, who worked as an organizer for the Bernie Sanders campaign, seeking to channel mass opposition to Trump and American capitalism back into the two-party system. She is sowing illusions that the Democratic Party can be transformed either through “progressive” Democratic candidates winning primaries or by pushing their opponents (in this case Crowley rather than Hillary Clinton) to the left. As with the Sanders campaign, a wide range of liberal publications and pseudo-left organizations have thrown their weight behind Ocasio-Cortez.

So far her campaign has been endorsed by Sanders’ Our Revolution, Brand New Congress and Justice Democrats, as well as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The DSA, to which Ocasio-Cortez belongs, has organized phone banks, canvassed for her and produced her campaign video. Curiously however, despite publicly

endorsing her, the DSA has made no further comment on her campaign and its affiliated publication *Jacobin* has remained quiet. A search of the websites of both the DSA and *Jacobin* for “Ocasio” yields the response “no result.”

This reflects an apparent agreement between the DSA and the Democratic Party establishment, at least as far as recent elections are concerned: DSA candidates may run for local and state legislative seats, as they did last year in Virginia and this year in Pennsylvania, California and other states, but they will not interfere in the central concern of the Democratic Party leadership, which is to win back control of the US House of Representatives, and so gain a “place at the table” in negotiations with the Trump administration over domestic and foreign policy.

The DSA is not backing any “left” candidates for Congress in districts targeted by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee as potential takeovers from the Republicans. In the case of Ocasio-Cortez, whether she wins or loses in the primary, there is no chance that the Democrats would lose the seat, since the Republican Party is virtually moribund in 14th Congressional District. Its token candidate in 2016 took 17 percent of the vote against Crowley.

Ocasio-Cortez has been given some publicity by a section of the corporate media, with multiple references to her campaign appearing in both *New York Times*, which functions as the mouthpiece of the Democratic Party, and the *Wall Street Journal*. This media attention is a reflection of a section of the ruling elite, which fears that the complete discrediting of the two-party system amid a wave of working class protests against inequality, austerity and the Trump administration. They view her candidacy as a potential safety valve.

The last thing on Ocasio-Cortez’s agenda is any break with the Democratic Party. She has spent her entire adult life in or around it. She first worked as an intern for Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy, while attending college at Boston University. After graduating she joined the publishing house Brook Avenue Press and in 2012 shared a platform with New York Democratic Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, where she endorsed the senator’s bill for tax breaks for new businesses. After a four-year hiatus from politics, she joined the Sanders campaign.

Ocasio-Cortez was recruited by Brand New Congress, a political action committee (PAC) established by former Sanders campaign staff, to run against Crowley. Her campaign has been based on a platform (universal healthcare, abolishment of private prisons, a federal jobs guarantee, defunding of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, etc.) that has popular appeal, and which would

never be implemented by a Democratic Party Congress or administration.

While denouncing Crowley for accepting donations from large corporations, Ocasio-Cortez continued to reference Gillibrand (who has raised over \$16 million between 2013 and 2018 predominantly from corporate backers) as a supporter of a federal jobs guarantee on her election website.

After Gillibrand endorsed Crowley, Ocasio-Cortez pleaded with the senator, tweeting to her, “5 years ago you asked me speak [sic] in favor of your Small Biz Support Act. I showed up and we worked together... I’m surprised you left me out today. If you’d like to reconsider, I’m happy to talk. DM [direct message] me.” Ocasio-Cortez has since removed the reference to Gillibrand on her campaign website, only including a link to an article in *Nation* magazine that includes quotes from Ocasio-Cortez and Gillibrand.

Similarly, she has adapted herself to the Democratic Party leadership’s policy of running openly right-wing candidates in so-called competitive districts. As she said in an interview with the online news website *Splinter*, “When you look at what we’ve got in the Democratic Party, the people who have these safe seats are centrist, corporatist Democrats. If we have to have centrist Democrats in the party, let those Democrats come from swing districts. But in districts that are very highly Democratic, we should be advancing the national conversation on prison abolition, on student debt cancellation [sic], on Puerto Rico, on a Marshall Plan, on 100% renewable energy in ten years.”

What her position translates to is that she is perfectly fine with the Democratic Party running pro-corporate politicians—and advocating and carrying out such policies—as long as it makes room for its “left” supporters in districts like the 14th CD in New York, where they can blather on about policies that the Democratic Party leadership flatly opposes, in order to provide a left cover.

While the DSA has kept Ocasio-Cortez largely under wraps, other pseudo-left tendencies have been more outspoken. Socialist Alternative, which fully embraced the Sanders campaign in 2016, declared their support for Ocasio-Cortez in an article published on their website on June 11. After making a purely rhetorical criticism about attempting to transform the Democratic Party from within, Leon Pinsky writes, “Socialist Alternative is working with Ocasio’s supporters to win the best result in the primary on June 26. It would be a political earthquake if Ocasio defeated the strongest Democrat in Queens who is also rumored to be the next Speaker of the House if the Democrats retake the chamber this fall.”

Pinsky reiterates Socialist Alternative’s claim that a section of the Democratic Party can be convinced to break from the party establishment and lay the basis for a “new mass party,” in other words, a new, somewhat more “left” talking capitalist party that would serve as an additional barrier to the struggle for the political independence of the working class based on a socialist program.

Ocasio-Cortez has also been featured on *The Intercept*, the liberal website edited by Glenn Greenwald that makes no secret of its embrace of the Sanders wing of the Democratic Party, and its all-out support for a Democratic victory in the 2018 congressional elections. In an interview with Greenwald, she said, “For as long as the Democratic Party continues to work with special interests, lobbyist groups and corporations to really perpetuate economic marginalization of Americans, as well as social and racial marginalization, then we’re not gonna get anywhere.” Another commentator on *The Intercept* gushed that Ocasio-Cortez “has a better grasp of identity politics than

any politician I can recall.” *The Intercept* highlighted a conflict between Ocasio-Cortez and Crowley over the challenger’s emphasis on her Puerto Rican roots—the Bronx portion of the district is heavily Hispanic, while the Queens portion includes large Irish, Greek, Hispanic and Asian populations. Crowley at one point complained that Ocasio-Cortez was “making the race about race,” and asked what was wrong with his emphasizing his Irish heritage.

The two Democrats debated each other two weeks before the primary, and even *The Intercept* had to admit in its report that “Crowley might be right: the candidates’ positions don’t, as he put it, have much ‘daylight’ between them.” Crowley emphasized the fight against Trump, and his own potential leadership role if the Democratic Party wins control of the House. He claimed to be a “progressive” and cited his ties to Obama, Gillibrand and California Senator Kamala Harris.

He also pledged to support Ocasio-Cortez if she won the primary, and asked her to do the same, but she declined. (Significantly, Crowley has the endorsement of the Working Families Party, controlled by a section of the union bureaucracy, and could use that ballot line to continue his campaign in the fall if he loses the Democratic primary).

The debate underscored the lack of any genuine, substantive differences between the two candidates. Crowley is an uninspired and uninspiring political hack who may prevail in the primary by sheer financial and organizational muscle. Ocasio-Cortez offers youth, ethnicity, and the label “democratic socialist,” but like Bernie Sanders she does not actually offer a single policy that could legitimately be called socialist. She is merely a new coat of paint on a dilapidated signboard.

In order to address issues of the attack on immigrant rights, inequality and war, young people and working people must break with the Democratic Party, including figures like Ocasio-Cortez and various pseudo-left forces attached to her campaign, and build a mass socialist movement. The *World Socialist Web Site* encourage anyone serious about carrying out this fight to join the Socialist Equality Party build the leadership for the emerging working class struggles.



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