

Politics in bad faith: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez campaigns in Michigan

Andre Damon
31 July 2018

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, visited Southeast Michigan this past weekend. Her primary victory last month over New York Congressman Joe Crowley has made her, virtually overnight, a leading spokesperson for the Democratic Party.

Ocasio-Cortez appeared at rallies in Detroit, Flint and Ypsilanti, as part of a statewide tour in support of Abdul El-Sayed, a former Detroit health department official running for governor of Michigan.

Ocasio-Cortez has been lionized in the press as the leader of a radical wave sweeping over the Democratic Party. Given the location of her events—including Detroit, the poorest large city in America, and Flint, which has been devastated by a lead water crisis—anyone taking her and the DSA’s pretenses to “socialism” seriously might have expected to hear bold proposals for tackling America’s rampant social inequality.

But when it came time for her to speak, what followed was a torrent of evasive and dishonest platitudes. She began her remarks at Wayne State University in Detroit:

My fingers are tingling right now because I know that this room is not just a rally, not just an audience, or even just a community; this is movement. Movement cannot be stopped, movement is like a wave; that energy cannot be contained, and Abdul, like many others, is just the crest, is just the foam at the tip of that wave. This is a movement so much bigger than just one person, there is no one person that is the future, there is a people that is the future.

To see such statements in print is to confirm the impression they produce on the listener: So much hot air.

America needs a “salt of the earth government,” Ocasio-Cortez went on, because, “We know that what is right in one place is what is right in all places.” And so on and so forth.

Like Barack Obama, whom she acknowledges as an inspiration, Ocasio-Cortez revels in seemingly profound motivational statements that are, upon the slightest examination, shown to be devoid of content. Her speeches are a variant of Obama’s slogan: “Yes we can.” She makes no effort to explain why Obama’s “Yes we can” was turned into eight years of “No we can’t.”

She continued, “The future of this nation and the future of this party is working class, the future of this party is working people, the future of this party is the marginalized, it is women, it is gender-extended people, it is people of color, it is the affirmation of justice, that is the future of this party.”

This invocation of the working class, mixed with appeals to other “identities,” is in bad faith, because the entire purpose of her campaign, and of the existence of the DSA, is to promote the Democratic Party, which, along with the Republicans, is a party of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

The Democrats are currently in the midst of a ferociously right-wing campaign centered on denunciations of Trump for “betraying” the country to Russia. In the midterm elections, the Democrats are fielding an unprecedented number of former members of the CIA and the military, which reflects their position as the preferred party of dominant sections of the military-intelligence apparatus.

Ocasio-Cortez’s inability to say anything genuinely

oppositional, let alone radical, is bound up with her political role. She has quickly been absorbed into the Democratic Party establishment, and her rhetoric conforms to its politics. In promoting a right-wing party, her “left-wing” gloss is reduced to empty slogans.

Only a few sentences of her speech touched on actual policy. “The future of this party is improved and expanded Medicare for all,” she declared. For Abdul El-Sayed, “Medicare for all” means a statewide health care system paid for by workers from their own paychecks, one which his website boasts will exempt a substantial number of businesses from health care contributions.

Such campaign promises are meaningless anyway. Obama declared himself a “proponent of a single payer universal health care program” in 2003, before going on to implement the “Affordable Care Act,” a reactionary attack on health care that shifts the burden from corporations and the state to workers by requiring individuals to purchase private insurance. This was cynically packaged as a major social “reform.”

Of particular note in the rallies to which Ocasio-Cortez spoke was the absence of any reference to foreign policy or the slightest hint of opposition to war. In fact, it was as if the rest of the world did not exist.

When a WSWS reporter asked the candidates at the post-rally press briefing in Detroit, “Do both of you support withdrawing all US troops from the Middle East and Africa?” El-Sayed gave an evasive non-answer: “We’ve got to make sure that we are focused on a foreign policy that articulates what we all can do when we come together around a more peaceful world.”

A staffer immediately attempted to conclude the briefing. When the reporter restated the question, “Ms. Ocasio-Cortez, are you anti-war? Do you support withdrawing all US troops from the Middle East?”

She replied, “I’m sorry, I’m here to support Abdul.”

The press conference immediately concluded, and the candidates were whisked away. (The next day, another WSWS reporter asked Ocasio-Cortez the same question at a rally in Ypsilanti, Michigan. She gave the same rehearsed answer.)

After the conclusion of the press conference, a WSWS reporter asked a high-level Ocasio-Cortez staffer, “What does she think the tax rate on the top

income bracket should be?” He said he could not answer that question, because “She’s just focused on getting candidates with a similar program elected right now.”

In other words, Ocasio-Cortez can’t even commit to an explicit policy of raising taxes on the wealthiest section of society. In the spectrum of traditional American politics, this places her “democratic socialism” somewhere on the left wing of the 1960s-era Republican Party. Her inability to make any statement in opposition to war likewise put her to the right of both major Democratic nominees in the 1968 presidential primaries, who ran on an anti-war program.

The events make clear the political function of the Democratic Socialists of America. Far from creating a politically independent socialist movement, the DSA functions as an adjunct of the Democratic Party, providing candidates whose programs are largely indistinguishable from the rest of the party and are compatible with the agenda of the “CIA Democrats.”

The political role of Ocasio-Cortez and a slew of similar, DSA-backed candidates is to put a “left-wing,” “progressive,” youth-oriented, and multicultural gloss on a right-wing, pro-war party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact