

The strange case of Julia Salazar, Democratic Socialists of America candidate for New York Senate

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Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member Julia Salazar won the Democratic nomination for State Senator in New York's 18th State Senate District on September 13. She is running unopposed to represent the north Brooklyn district in November's general election.

Socialist Worker and *Jacobin* have claimed that Salazar's primary victory represents a major advance for the left, with *Jacobin* proclaiming, "We're on a winning streak." According to *Jacobin*, the Salazar campaign demonstrates that "running in the Democratic Party and taking the fight directly to those who control it is a positive good, as it accelerates the alienation of the Democratic Party's base from its leadership."

In fact, the DSA's electoral strategy serves to prop up the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of big business, capitalism, war and attacks on democratic rights. The DSA and DSA-backed candidates have received prominent coverage in the mainstream media and support from sections of the Democratic Party establishment precisely for this reason.

Salazar's campaign was heavily backed by the publications of the pseudo-left, particularly the *Jacobin* web site, which prominently featured an interview with her on its front page more than two months prior to the election.

These groups were thrown into crisis by the revelation before the elections that Salazar had systematically fabricated and/or misrepresented her personal and political history, kicked off by an August 23 article in *Tablet*. Among the revelations was the fact that Salazar, until recently, had been a far-right, anti-abortion Republican.

The response of pseudo-left publications *Socialist Worker* (published by the International Socialist Organization) and *Jacobin* has been to double down on

their support for Salazar. The information on Salazar's background has been presented as part of, in the words of *Socialist Worker*, a "steady and vicious smear campaign drummed up by both liberal and right-wing media outlets."

Salazar's misrepresentation of her past is, however, politically significant. Even as of this writing, Salazar's campaign site bio boasts of her "decade of experience as a local community organizer" who has "spent her life fighting for social justice in her community." At 27, this "decade" would include all of Salazar's adult life, including her time at Columbia University.

However, as has now been revealed, Salazar was actually a right-wing activist for much of that time—a peculiar kind of "community organizer." She co-founded and was the president of Columbia's chapter of Christians United for Israel (CUFI), a right-wing Christian Zionist student group, and in that capacity appeared on far-right TV host Glenn Beck's show in 2012 remotely from CUFI's convention in San Antonio, Texas.

After Beck said that some Columbia professors are "Muslim Brotherhood and communist" and asked how many "anti-Israel professors" there were, Salazar replied that there were "several...in Middle Eastern languages and cultures, and they are using the classroom as their podium to spread lies about the State of Israel, to delegitimize the State of Israel, and to spread propaganda to Columbia students."

At Columbia, she was a prominent anti-abortion activist and president of Columbia Right to Life. She campaigned (successfully) to prevent a required student health insurance fee from being used to fund students' abortions, a microcosm of the right wing's nationwide attacks on the right to an abortion by restricting the use of tax dollars to fund the procedure.

Other aspects of Salazar's past were misrepresented as well. She has repeatedly referred to herself as an immigrant at campaign events and in interviews, although she was born in Florida. She has since claimed that she never obscured this, saying, "I don't present myself as an immigrant nor as a non-citizen."

Salazar converted to Judaism in 2012 or 2013, while she was a student at Columbia University, but she has implied that she was raised in the Jewish religion, writing on *Mondoweiss*: "Like most American Jews, I was raised with the delusion that Israel was a safe haven for me, perhaps even the only safe place for Jews." She has in various places referred to her family as Jewish or mixed Jewish and Catholic, but now says that it is Catholic.

Her claims to have grown up in an economically struggling household have also been undermined by statements from her mother and brother, as well as photos supplied by her brother to the press of their large childhood house and jet skis.

In the process of the degrading tabloid coverage of Salazar's past, it has come to light that she lived next to and was a family friend of baseball legend Keith Hernandez, and that she reportedly has a trust fund of over \$600,000—an unusual outcome for a working-class upbringing.

Salazar left herself open to the attacks of the right wing and the media by placing her identity and (largely manufactured) socio-economic background at the center in her campaign. On her web site prior to August, most of the "issues" include a reference to how she is uniquely situated to fight for these issues: "As a proud immigrant myself...", "Like everyone who depends on the subway to get to work every day...", "As a proud union member. ..." Her campaign speeches routinely leaned on her identity.

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Salazar appears to have rapidly shifted her political views following a visit to Israel, and by 2014 she presented herself as left-wing and anti-Zionist, although she was a registered Republican until 2017. She joined the DSA sometime after leaving Columbia, and now is on the organizing committee of the New York City DSA socialist-feminist working group.

Several issues are raised by these revelations. Why did Salazar lie about her past? To the extent that the ISO and DSA address Salazar's rapid political shift from a right-wing, anti-abortion Zionist to a leading member of the DSA, it is to portray it as a natural and positive political evolution.

No doubt workers and others who formerly held reactionary views will increasingly turn toward socialist politics. However, Salazar's political evolution is far from run-of-the-mill. She was extremely active in right-wing politics until just before her entry into pseudo-left politics, a transition that was apparently unchallenging. Her enthusiastic agreement with Beck's fascistic rantings in 2012 was supplemented by strident anti-abortion activism into 2013. She maintained relations with right-wing Zionists in 2013, and says she began attending *Jacobin* reading groups the next year.

From there, she was rapidly elevated into the leadership of the DSA in New York City, now being promoted as a new face, along with Ocasio-Cortez, of the Democratic Party.

Salazar's newfound identity—political and otherwise—was politically useful, whatever its origins. A July 6 *Jacobin* interview, which is still featured prominently on the front page of its web site, inadvertently sheds light on why a candidate would lean on identity rather than her "socialist" platform. The interview depicts Salazar's campaign as an opportunity to continue the rise of the DSA's brand of pseudo-reformism after the primary victory of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in June.

Salazar says that the "main problem" of the Democratic Party's "establishment" "is a lack of political imagination," as if a couple of firebrand campaigners can make the Democrats "fight for the working class and marginalized."

The "image" of Salazar (or Ocasio-Cortez, etc.) is a stand-in for an actual political program. The individuals themselves are supposedly embodiments of the progressive transformation of the Democratic Party, even as the Democratic Party remains under the control of the financial elite and the military-intelligence apparatus. As such, constructing the appropriate "narrative" and personal history—however invented it may be—is essential.



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