

The political role of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Genevieve Leigh
31 January 2019

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the youngest woman to be elected to Congress, has rapidly become one of the highest-profile political figures in Washington.

She is the subject of hundreds of articles in the mainstream media. She has been featured on late-night talk shows and was given a special segment on the CBS show “60 Minutes.” Her Twitter account has generated more interactions—retweets plus likes—than party leaders Barack Obama, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer. Among political figures in the US, she is second only to President Donald Trump.

There are two factors behind Ocasio-Cortez’s sudden rise to political prominence. Among broader sections of the population, she has attracted support as a result of her association with socialism. The two most popular figures in the Democratic Party, Senator Bernie Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez, nominally claim to be socialists. Under conditions in which the population is fed an unrelenting diet of right-wing and reactionary politics, anyone who speaks about issues of social inequality can quickly get widespread support.

The second and more decisive factor is the conscious promotion and elevation of Ocasio-Cortez by the Democratic Party and the media. Ocasio-Cortez performs a critical political function—that of providing a left cover for a right-wing party, the better to block the development of a genuine movement against social inequality and capitalism.

Ocasio-Cortez’s tax increase proposal and the “Scandinavian model”

Ocasio-Cortez has received much media attention—and praise from nominally left organizations around the Democratic Party—for her recent proposal to increase taxes on the wealthy to 70 percent, the level that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s. *Jacobin* magazine, which is associated with the DSA and operates in the orbit of the Democratic Party, called the proposal “just one modest plank in the type of progressive tax platform necessary to curb the social and political power of the rich.”

In speaking about her tax proposal, Ocasio-Cortez has referred to her policies as “radical.” Karl Marx once wrote that “to be radical is to grasp the root of the matter.” The essence of Ocasio-Cortez’s proposals, however, is to obscure the root of the matter: capitalism. She never seeks to address the social and historical foundations of what she is criticizing. Instead, her rhetoric and policy proposals only scratch the surface.

Take, for example, her reference to the “Scandinavian model.” Asked in the recent “60 Minutes” interview what her vision of socialism was, Ocasio-Cortez replied that “what my policies most closely resemble is what we see in the UK, Norway, Finland and Sweden.”

She refers to the UK as a model of “socialism,” but what is the reality of social life in Britain? Home of the House of Windsor and the City of London financial parasites, Britain is the most unequal country in Europe. A fifth of the population, or 14 million people, live in poverty.

Following World War II, the working class won certain concessions in

Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland that went further than in most other capitalist countries. This was due to exceptional economic and political conditions—above all, the fear of socialist revolution in the wake of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917.

A wave of industrial militancy by the working class took place throughout the world. The establishment of the social reforms in Sweden, including a public works program, the reduction of the working day, and unemployment insurance, for example, came out of protracted class struggles. The sweeping reform package of 1932 came on the heels of state violence employed in the city of Ådalen in May 1931 after timber and pulp workers called for a general strike, in which five workers were killed.

Similar circumstances formed the background to the “New Deal” programs of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the taxation policy that characterized the postwar period in the US. These were not gifts from on high, delivered by a ruling class out of benevolence. They were wrenching through bitter class battles (such as the Minneapolis truck drivers strike, the Toledo Auto-Lite strike and the San Francisco general strike). Roosevelt himself was quite conscious that his reform measures were necessary to avoid revolution.

The bourgeoisie never forgave the working class for the gains achieved in an earlier period. Previously granted concessions were ruthlessly stripped away from the 1980s onwards, producing a devastating social crisis, the Scandinavian countries being no exception. The Social Democratic government in Sweden, for example, oversaw between 1994 and 2006 large-scale privatizations in education and health care, as well as cuts in welfare programs. As the WSWS has noted, “Sweden has seen one of the fastest increases in social inequality among OECD countries in recent years, while a 2014 study revealed that the top 1 percent in Denmark own almost a third of the total wealth.”

The globalization of capitalist production has undermined the foundations of all programs of national reform. In the United States, the ruling class has responded to the decline in the position of American capitalism with a ruthless policy of social counterrevolution.

Absent from the “socialism” of Ocasio-Cortez is any reference to the class struggle, let alone a revolutionary movement that would overturn capitalism.

Consider what would be required to implement a 70 percent tax rate increase on the wealthiest Americans. It would require the same financial oligarchy that has spent decades rolling back taxes, amassing sums of wealth never before seen in history, to give up part of this wealth voluntarily. Furthermore, it would require the political representatives of this financial aristocracy—Democrats and Republicans who handed over trillions to the banks in the aftermath of the 2008 crash—to facilitate the adoption of such a measure.

This transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top was consciously carried out over decades by Republican and Democratic governments alike. The reduction of top-income tax rates began under Kennedy. In fact, it was the Obama administration that oversaw the largest transfer of wealth in history during its eight-year reign.

The fight for measures to address social inequality—a tax not just on

income, but on wealth—requires a frontal attack on the power of this ruling class. That power comes from the ruling class' ownership of the banks and giant corporations and its control of the state. Even such reforms, therefore, require the mobilization of the working class in a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist ruling class and its political apparatus.

Ocasio-Cortez and the Democratic Party

The central political fiction espoused by Ocasio-Cortez and all of those who have promoted her is the notion that anything progressive can be achieved within the framework of the Democratic Party, the oldest capitalist party in America, at a time, moreover, when the Democrats are moving sharply to the right.

The media campaign around Ocasio-Cortez is a repetition of the operation that was mounted behind the 2016 Sanders campaign, which was used to promote the fiction that the Democratic Party can be reformed. Sanders' own role in 2016 was to channel opposition behind Hillary Clinton, the candidate of the military and Wall Street.

Part of this media campaign is the portrayal of Ocasio-Cortez as a humble bartender who took on the Democratic Party establishment through grassroots campaigning. In reality, the origins of Ocasio-Cortez's campaign for Congress are quite different.

The Ocasio-Cortez campaign was orchestrated by a newly formed political action committee called Justice Democrats. The PAC was originally set up by Cenk Uygur of the Young Turks and Kyle Kulinski of Secular Talk (who have since left those organizations), and former leaders of the 2016 Sanders presidential campaign.

Ocasio-Cortez was selected out of a pool of thousands of candidates. Many of the figures who ran her campaign and now work on her staff are thoroughly integrated into establishment politics. Her chief of staff, for example, Saikat Chakrabarti, one of the founding members of Justice Democrats, began his career right out of Harvard with a brief stint at a hedge fund, before leaving to make millions in Silicon Valley when he co-founded Mockingbird, a web design tool. He went on to work for the payment processor Stripe before joining the Sanders campaign in 2015.

Chakrabarti and his co-founders explain on their website that they started Justice Democrats "to create a left-wing populist movement to support alternative Democratic candidates" who are generally "ideologically aligned" with their core values. In other words, their aim is to promote candidates who can give a new face to the Democratic Party while leaving unchanged the content of the party's politics.

Figures like Ocasio-Cortez are elevated to give a left gloss to a party that is in fact moving sharply to the right.

The rightward trajectory of the Democratic Party has become even more pronounced since the election of Donald Trump. The pro-war and anti-democratic basis of the Democrats' opposition to Donald Trump is summed up by its frothing response to Trump's announcement last month that he would withdraw US troops from Syria and reduce troop levels in Afghanistan, and its praise for the former Marine general and war criminal James Mattis, who resigned his post as defense secretary in protest over Trump's moves.

None of the media pundits care to square their talk of a "left" and "progressive" turn by the Democratic Party with the fact that the new House Democratic caucus reelected the same leadership, headed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, that has overseen the right-wing policies of the Democrats. Ocasio-Cortez herself voted for Pelosi as a signal to the Democratic Party establishment that she is very willing to play her assigned role.

As significant as anything she has said is what Ocasio-Cortez has not

said since her election. She has said virtually nothing about foreign policy or war. She has remained silent about the anti-Russia campaign, the Democrats' subservience to the CIA, the unending militarist violence carried out by the Obama administration and nearly every other crime of US imperialism.

Ocasio-Cortez's silence comes not from ignorance but from fundamental agreement. In the rare instances when she does broach the topic, it only reinforces this fact. This was demonstrated most clearly in her comments on the death of the arch-warmonger Senator John McCain when she tweeted: "John McCain's legacy represents an unparalleled example of human decency (See: "Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders praise McCain: An object lesson in the politics of the pseudo-left").

This fact is of enormous significance. Just as Sanders' pledge to support "drones, all that and more" revealed the essence of his politics, so does Ocasio-Cortez's silence on war and the warmongering of the Democrats reveal the essence of her politics.

The 'Priests of Half Truth'

Trotsky wrote in March 1938 of "The Priests of Half Truth," speaking of the liberal media:

Their philosophy reflects their own world. By their social nature they are intellectual semi-bourgeois. They feed upon half-thoughts and half-feelings. They wish to cure society by half-measures. Regarding the historical process as too unstable a phenomenon, they refuse to engage themselves more than fifty percent. Thus, these people, living by half-truths, that is to say, the worst form of falsehood, have become a genuine brake upon truly progressive, i.e., revolutionary thought.

Such words could be applied to the politics of Ocasio-Cortez. Much water has passed under the bridge over the past 80 years, however. Today's version of that era's priests of half truth would perhaps more accurately be called the priests and priestesses of one-quarter or one-eighth truth.

Ocasio-Cortez feeds on "half-thoughts" in the sense that she criticizes social inequality, global warming, etc., but refuses to say anything about the social and historical conditions that produce these maladies and the political forces responsible. She proposes curing inequality by supporting the Democratic Party, one of the two parties that promoted it. She proposes to attack the wealth of the rich without attacking the social system upon which this wealth is based.

Such "half-truths" are, as Trotsky noted, the worst form of falsehood—they aim to chloroform, to misdirect, and thereby provide an essential service to the ruling class. All those who promote her, as they promoted Sanders before her and Obama before him, are assisting in this process of political cover-up.

There are social interests that underlie these politics. Pseudo-left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America, the International Socialist Organization and Socialist Alternative, which promote figures like Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders, use populist slogans to cover over the fundamental class issues, subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party, and promote the social interests of more privileged sections of the upper-middle class.

The root cause of the problems facing humanity in 2019—unending wars, unprecedented inequality, attacks on democratic rights, environmental

catastrophe, the largest refugee crisis in history, the rise of the far-right, to name a few—is the global capitalist system.

The overthrow of this social system will not come through the politics of Ocasio-Cortez, Sanders, or those who will inevitably be brought forward in the future, but through the independent mobilization of the working class, on an international scale, in the revolutionary fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact