

Knock Down the House and the Democratic Party politics of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

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The new Netflix documentary *Knock Down the House* follows four women candidates running in Democratic Congressional primary races against establishment Democrats in 2018: Cori Bush of St. Louis; Amy Vilela of Las Vegas; Paula Jean Swearengin of Coal City, West Virginia.; and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of the Bronx, New York, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Of the four women highlighted in the documentary, only Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez won in her primary and later in the general election, defeating the fourth most powerful House Democrat, Joe Crowley. Ocasio-Cortez receives the overwhelming majority of the screen time.

The film was directed and shot by Rachel Lears and was edited by her husband, Robin Blotnick. Lears and Blotnick worked closely with Brand New Congress, a self-described progressive organization whose stated aim is to replace establishment politicians (overwhelmingly Democrats) with “everyday Americans.” Brand New Congress is closely affiliated with Justice Democrats. The two political action committees backed 79 candidates in the 2018 primary, including Ocasio-Cortez.

The heavy influence of Brand New Congress and Justice Democrats is present throughout the film. The general thesis put forward is that the Democratic Party, which is deeply discredited as the party of Wall Street and the military, is facing an insurgency from within.

Some scenes in the film speak to the real social and economic problems that lie behind the growth of opposition to both Democrats and Republicans.

Paula Jean Swearengin, from Coal City, West Virginia, who challenged the wealthy West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin in the Democratic primary, is featured in one scene overlooking the devastating environmental impact of the coal industry in West Virginia. She explains to the camera: “If another country came in here and blew up our mountains and poisoned our water we would go to war. But industry can.”

Cori Bush, in Missouri, recalls the police murder of unarmed teen Michael Brown in 2014 while leaving her modest apartment building just six minutes from Ferguson. Scenes of riot police and armored trucks violently attacking protesters in the aftermath of the Brown’s death appear on the screen. “It

was like a battleground at home,” Bush explains.

How are any of these great social issues going to be addressed and resolved? To the extent that *Knock Down the House* has an answer, it suggests all that’s needed is the election of “ordinary Americans,” who happen to be members of the Democratic Party.

The rest of the documentary is largely devoted to recounting the primary campaigns of the four candidates, returning always to Ocasio-Cortez. Certain sordid aspects of the American electoral process—including how political personalities such as Ocasio-Cortez’s are manufactured and manipulated—come through, as do the operations of the Democratic Party machine.

In one scene, Swearengin is confronting her loss in the primary, deciding whether or not to continue as an independent. One of her advisers tells her that to do so would mean the “end of her political career.” She gets a call from Manchin, in the pocket of the coal companies, who congratulates her on a great campaign.

The film concludes with Ocasio-Cortez’s victory as a representative of the US House of Representatives, which she will presumably proceed to “knock down.”

A few points can be made about the film and the political phenomena it addresses.

First, the notion of a grassroots uprising within the Democratic Party is fraudulent. The “insurgency” is being directed by a faction of the Democratic Party hierarchy itself.

The Executive Director of Justice Democrats, Alexandra Rojas, worked for the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign on the National Staff before starting Brand New Congress. She later established Justice Democrats along with Corbin Trent who was the National Campaign Coordinator for the Bernie Sanders campaign.

Ocasio-Cortez’s chief of staff, Saikat Chakrabarti, followed a similar path. Chakrabarti began his career after 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 colleagues 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: enter Ocasio-Cortez, and also the DSA.

Sanders himself has gone from the “insurgent” campaign in the 2016 elections to a fixture of Democratic Party politics. In the 2020 elections, he is making no secret of his effort to promote and bolster the Democratic Party.

Second, the claim that the election of “progressive Democrats” will transform American politics is belied by what has become of Ocasio-Cortez in only a short period of time. Her brief tenure in Congress has already demonstrated clearly that her politics are entirely compatible with those of the Democratic Party “establishment.”

Ocasio-Cortez has been silent about the Democrats’ anti-Russia campaign and the illegal persecution of Julian Assange, about the unending militarist violence carried out by the Obama administration and nearly every other crime of US imperialism. She has dropped her demand to abolish ICE and cultivated a close relationship with House leader, Nancy Pelosi.

Her comments on the death of the arch-warmonger John McCain echoed Sanders’ pledge to support “drones, all that and more.” 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”). Nothing remains of her criticisms of US militarism that won her a standing ovation from a small crowd of workers in one her first district debates (against a stand-in for Crowley) featured in a striking scene of the documentary.

Notably absent from the film, it should be mentioned, is any reference to socialism, despite the fact that the two most popular figures in the Democratic Party, not to mention the protagonist of the film, at least occasionally identify as “democratic socialists.”

Nonetheless, a significantly fraudulent feature of *Knock Down the House* is its use of left-wing language, including denunciations of “luxury real estate developers, Wall Street banks, and for-profit healthcare corporations,” and its implication that Ocasio-Cortez and the others are firmly opposed to war, that they stand for health care for all, that they vehemently oppose corporate control of the political system, that they will battle against environmental damage and that, in general, they are fierce opponents of the existing system.

This is an effort to swindle the working class, tie it to a party of its most bitter enemies and render it vulnerable to the enormous attacks to come.

Third, the central claim advanced by Justice Democrats and Brand New Congress, that the Democrats can be transformed, is hardly new. The Democratic Party is the graveyard of social movements. The presidential campaigns of the populist William Jennings Bryan in the late 19th and early 20th century; the Farmer-Labor Party campaign of Robert La Follette in the

1920s; the Henry Wallace Campaign in 1948; more recently the campaigns of figures like Denis Kucinich and Bernie Sanders himself—all served in one form or another to maintain social opposition within the framework of the Democratic Party and the political establishment.

Political organizations in and around the Democratic Party worked to channel the Vietnam antiwar movement behind the Democrats, and a similar operation was carried out with the mass demonstrations against the Iraq war in 2002-03. Opposition to the war crimes of the Bush administration was channeled behind Obama—whose victory in 2008 was hailed by pseudo-left organizations as “transformative,” who ended up expanding war, bailing out the banks and overseeing a massive transfer of wealth to the rich.

The Democratic Party is the oldest existing capitalist party in the US and one of the oldest existing capitalist parties in the world. It cannot be shifted or transformed. Whether its representatives use “left” phrases or not, the Democrats loyally serve the American ruling elite, the corporations and the rich.

Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez and others are seeking to perform their own brand of political alchemy under conditions in which the Democratic Party is more right-wing than ever before, more beholden to the banks, more subservient to the CIA and the military.

The renewed effort to promote Democratic Party politics will not knock down anything, either the “House” or the Democratic Party itself. Its purpose, rather, is the exact opposite—to preserve and uphold a political organization and social and economic system that is tottering and beginning to fall over.



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