

Book Review: Red State Revolt – Part II

The Democratic Socialists of America shows its hostility to socialism

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This is the second and concluding part of the review of Red State Revolt. The first part can be found at: Part I

The “dirty break” theory

While the strikes of teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, like all the others, were proclaimed victories by Blanc, the central role of the Democrat Party in axing social spending creates certain obvious difficulties in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) sales pitch for the 2020 elections.

Blanc “solves” this problem by reprising the age-old opportunist claim that “boring within” the Democratic Party can serve the working class. It is not for nothing that the Democratic Party is considered the graveyard of all progressive movements.

Blanc’s theory, as elaborated in an internal International Socialist Organization (ISO) debate published on the defunct *Socialist Worker* website, states that socialists may utilize the Democratic “ballot line” and support Democrats such as Bernie Sanders while criticizing the Democratic Party as a whole. This he terms a “dirty break” with the Democrats, as opposed to a “clean break”—that is a principled opposition of any support to, or collaboration with, a capitalist party.

Blanc supports his argument for the efficacy of a “dirty break” with the claim that “insurgent candidates” such as Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez are “decidedly not backed by a wing of the capitalist class, the Democratic Party establishment nor its proxies in the labor bureaucracy.” Such bald lies are exposed by every move made in Sanders’ long career of shilling for Democrats, his endorsement of Hillary Clinton in 2016 and the loyal actions of the “Squad” since their ascension to office. Were any additional evidence required, their recent support for Trump’s record-setting war budget last month puts paid to such nonsense. These phony “insurgents” are merely one in a long line of re-branding campaigns by the Democratic Party.

Further, *Red State Revolt* employs a “on the one hand, on the other hand” approach to muddle-over the DSA’s defense of the Democratic Party as a whole. Blanc references Barack Obama’s bank bailout hand-in-hand with his assault on public education; Arizona’s former Democratic governor Janet Napolitano’s \$500 million in tax breaks to the wealthy at the expense of schools; and the role of West Virginia’s former governor Joe Manchin whose tax cuts bankrupted the Public Employee Insurance Agency (PEIA) and state education. But Blanc rapidly moves on to make the case that this is not really the fault of the oldest capitalist party in the

nation. Instead, he says, it is the lack of a “militant labor movement.” More pressure is needed from the unions, he states, but then admits that “having won a ‘seat at the table,’ public sector unions ... actively enforced strike prohibitions from the 1980s onwards.”

According to the DSA, workers have failed to put enough pressure on the unions, which if sufficiently pushed, would pressure the Democrats, which, in turn, would pressure the corporate and financial powers-that-be to carry out reforms. So, in the end, it’s the fault of the workers for lacking “the courage” to put this imaginary conga line into motion.

Blanc and the DSA try to deceive leftward moving workers and young people with left-sounding phrases about “socialism” only to reinforce illusions in the possibility of reforming capitalism. For 40 years, such national reformist pipedreams have been torpedoed by the bipartisan powers-that-be as they shredded the social safety net. Similarly, across the globe, social democratic and labor parties alike were imposing draconian austerity on the working class. The cause of this collapse is rooted not in the subjective failures of this or that leader but the nature of globalized capitalism, dominated by transnational corporations and banks constantly scouring the globe in search of the cheapest wages, the deepest tax cuts and the fewest regulations.

While peddling the lie that appeals to the conscience of the powers-that-be will produce fundamental change, the DSA opposes genuine Marxists who fight for the political independence of the working class based on an international socialist political program as “sectarians.”

This point was made explicit in the midst of the betrayal of the Los Angeles teachers’ strike when Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor of *Jacobin* and a consultant on the book, ridiculed the idea that workers require a thought-through perspective based on the lessons of the historical experiences of the working class and socialist movement in the US and internationally. He stated, “The DSA and the ISO [International Socialist Organization] sending tacos to striking teachers is pretty good. But the SEP [Socialist Equality Party] is sending them the correct program, and let’s not forget that’s the most important thing.”

In other words, the DSA’s role is to keep workers trapped within the confines of bourgeois politics, while the SEP strives to provide a correct political program through which they can free themselves from the political and ideological enslavement of the ruling class.

What were the “victories”?

Blanc holds up the struggle in West Virginia in particular as a model to emulate. The main demands were a fully-funded “fix” for their PEIA

healthcare system, a substantial increase in wages, wrap-around services for students, and no charters or school privatization.

Today, there is still no funding source for PEIA; an April 2019 meeting of the Finance Board issued a statement indicating benefits will be cut, or premiums hiked, once again by 2021. Wages still hover around 48th in the nation. School funding continues at abysmal levels. In June, the legislature voted to bring in charter schools.

The DSA's assistance in the betrayal of the teachers strike in West Virginia recently got a nod of approval from the ruling elites. *Time Magazine* named Comer and O'Neal in their list of the 100 most influential people in 2019 alongside the likes of Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Donald Trump and Michelle Obama.

What about the other "Red State" outcomes—all claimed as victories by *Red State Revolt*? In Oklahoma, teachers struck to reverse a 28 percent spending cut to schools. The Oklahoma Education Association pushed through a deal which promised an inadequate raise and school funding bump, to be paid for by regressive taxes. As of 2019, the state support for school operations remains \$103 million less than FY 2008, even as K-12 enrollment has grown by over 50,000 students.

In Arizona, 60,000 teachers walked out to demand the restoration of more than \$1.1 billion in cuts. The unions forced through an agreement fraudulently sold as making the budget whole and a 20 percent wage increase, but the deal was short-funded by at least \$700 million. In a cynical ploy, the unions called off the strike by claiming a ballot initiative "Invest in Ed" would make up the shortfall by "taxing the rich." This was enthusiastically endorsed by the DSA, ISO and local pseudo-left-administered Facebook pages. The Arizona Supreme Court struck down the measure for its minor impingement on the state's wealthiest. Despite its entirely predictable ignominious end, "Invest in Ed" is described in *Red State Revolt* as a "major advance" rather than a particularly dirty subterfuge by the unions.

Like the proverbial Angel of Death, AFT President Randi Weingarten and NEA President Lily Eskelsen García showed up across the US, preventing the spread of walkouts and negotiating their demise. This strikebreaking is transformed by Blanc into "the AFL-CIO, National Education Association (NEA), and AFT unfortunately failed to organize any systematic national support campaign." What a criminal coverup!

Despite the claim peddled by the pseudo-left among teachers that "we are the union," these organizations, like the entire AFL-CIO and similar outfits internationally, are not controlled by the workers. Instead, they operate as businesses, directed and controlled by an upper echelon in alliance with the capitalist state. Not only are the top officials like Weingarten and García paid in the neighborhood of a half million dollars a year, but as the recent NEA convention once again demonstrated, their efforts are entirely devoted to dues-collection, the suppression of the class struggle and election of politicians to shore up the financial and institutional interests of the union apparatus.

The unions seek to prevent any threat to their lucrative positions as labor contractors within the capitalist system. This is universal, above all demonstrated in the wholesale bribery of the United Auto Workers which, in return for millions of dollars, slashed the living standards of autoworkers and opened the sluices for a brutal broadside by Wall Street on the entire working class.

The DSA's insistence on the viability of reforming the unions, the Democrats and the capitalist system itself speaks to the class character of the DSA and similar organizations. The pseudo-left does not represent the working class, but a privileged upper-middle-class layer. Large numbers of DSA members, like ISO, Labor Notes, etc., do not merely orbit the unions but staff them and draw a comfortable paycheck within them. Their efforts are wholly directed at finding a niche for themselves within capitalism, not its overthrow.

Identity politics falls flat among striking teachers

The essential role of the DSA is to block workers and young people from genuine socialism. While they promote inane and seemingly "apolitical" conclusions like "strikes get the goods" or "when we fight, we win," behind these formulations stand a political program. In addition to their embrace of the Democratic Party and the union, this includes a hefty dose of identity politics.

Significantly, the author strained to find support for this outlook among striking teachers. Asking about the "particular challenges" facing female teachers in all three states, the author relates that teachers "almost always responded by insisting that the salient feature of the movement was that it united all educators."

Moreover, he regrets, "Among strikers, there was also very little discussion of race..." He quotes one African-American teacher stating, "There are a lot of Trump supporters and racists here in West Virginia. But I was totally included in the movement; I didn't feel any racism during the strike. You know, my next-door neighbor is a Trump supporter, but she stood right next to me on the picket line." This prompts Blanc to lecture the reader that "it would be essential to explore racial dynamics between teachers in more depth" because of centuries of "white supremacy."

Such formulations are stock-in-trade for the pseudo-left, which promotes a racist view of the world, dividing the working class and providing grist for Trump's fascist appeals.

No challenge to capitalism

Blanc's lengthy chapter "The Militant Minority" is touted as providing the key to the red state victories. In pitching the DSA's services to the union apparatus, *Red State Revolt* notes, "[C]ontrary to red-baiting stereotypes about nefarious radical infiltrators ...they [DSA members] had no intention of secretly manipulating public employees to impose a 'socialist agenda.' ... Socialists in West Virginia and across the country were not aiming to divert the working-class struggle; they were just trying to help it win. In fact, Comer and O'Neal both bent over backward to make sure that the movement 'stayed organic,' as they like to say."

Such passages are highly instructive. While Comer and O'Neal did a lot of "bend[ing] over backward," it was not to "win" but to corral militant teachers within the unions. "Staying organic" meant that the DSA offered up no challenge to the unions, which explicitly defend the "rights" of the oil and gas billionaires and Wall Street. As teachers were moving outside the unions and implicitly challenging the whole capitalist set-up, the DSA—in alliance with the anti-communist leaderships of the AFT and NEA—was desperately trying to bring them back into line. They functioned as nothing short of ideological police, a secondary buffer on behalf of capitalism.

The need to establish new organizations of struggle—rank and file committees which unify teachers, parents, and workers independent of the unions, the Democrats and Republican—stands as an essential lesson of these struggles. Its corollary is the struggle for a socialist program.

Putting a fine point on his repudiation of an anti-capitalist program, Blanc's apparent "maximum" demands are cited in the book's epilogue. He calls for a hodgepodge of proposals from labor law reform to aid union organizing drives and progressive taxation to "decommodifying" public services—making no challenge to the domination of society by the financial elite.

Scientific socialism

History has proven the decisive role of the fight for scientific socialism, Marxism, within the working class. Militant strike action does not provide workers “consciousness of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system,” as Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution, explains in his brilliant *What Is To be Done?* Socialist consciousness does not arise spontaneously out of the class struggle but must be brought into the working class by a revolutionary party basing itself of the theoretical insights of Marxism and historic lessons of the international working class and socialist movement.

Trade union consciousness—the conception that workers must bind together to appeal for reforms from the capitalist class and governments—is, as Lenin said, bourgeois consciousness which bases itself upon the continued existence of the capitalist system of wage-slavery. While this perspective has always subordinated the needs of the exploited to the capitalist class, it appeared to have some viability in period of the post-World War II boom—a period long over.

Today the advanced globalized economy is characterized by feverish international rivalries among capitalist states, an unremitting drive to strip the working class of any residual gains and a reckless drive towards world war. In this class conflict, the nationally based unions in every country have—without exception—aligned themselves fully behind their domestic ruling classes, endorsing austerity at home and imperialism abroad.

Red State Revolt exposes opportunism in action. The DSA, like the rest of the pseudo-left organizations, attempts to lend a “socialist” coloration to betrayal and supplies ideological apologetics for the trade unions, Sanders, the “insurgent Democrats” and, most fundamentally, the capitalist system itself.

To take the next round of struggles forward, the lessons of the 2018-19 upsurge must be assimilated. The first step is for teachers to build independent organizations of struggle, break free of the grip of the unions, and unite nationally and internationally.

The outcome of the teachers’ strikes in the US and around the world have demonstrated that the fight to secure the right to high quality public education for all is not possible without a frontal assault on the concentrated wealth of the corporate and financial oligarchy. This is only possible if the working class builds a politically independent movement and fights for genuine socialist policies, including the expropriation of the private fortunes of the super-rich and the transformation of the giant corporations into public enterprises collectively owned by the working class itself.

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