

# The DSA pays tribute to David Dinkins

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The death last week of David Dinkins, the Democratic mayor of New York City from 1990 through 1993, has called forth fulsome tributes from the usual quarters, including his fellow politicians and the big business media. He has been called a gentleman, “unfailingly polite,” an “able caretaker” and, in his later years, a “quiet elder statesman.” The establishment is simply honoring one of its own.

Among the accolades to the 93-year-old Dinkins, however, one source in particular stands out. For the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and its unofficial organ *Jacobin* magazine, one article in praise of the late Mr. Dinkins was not enough. On November 24, Ross Barkan’s article was titled, “Mayor David Dinkins Was Better Than Those Who Came After Him”—faint praise when one considers the role of Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg, but praise nevertheless.

The following day, David Duhalde wrote “What David Dinkins Taught Us.” Duhalde, a DSA staff member, informs us, in an unintentionally revealing statement, that when he was going through some old files in the office one day, he discovered that Dinkins “had been a member of ours for many years.”

Who would have guessed it? Dinkins never spoke at City Hall or addressed a message to his constituents as a “democratic socialist,” and virtually no one was aware of his DSA membership. In other words, his “socialism” never had the slightest connection with his role in government. In any event, Duhalde reports (without explanation and without any diminution of his praise) that Dinkins dropped his platonic DSA affiliation after a while, and soon was endorsing multibillionaire Michael Bloomberg for mayor.

David Dinkins was, in fact, a thoroughly conventional capitalist politician. A product of the Democratic clubhouse culture in Harlem, he occupied the patronage position of city clerk for many years, then advancing to the largely ceremonial position of Manhattan borough president before being elected the city’s first African-American mayor in 1989.

Dinkins had won the Democratic primary earlier that year against Edward Koch, who was trying for a fourth term in

office. Koch, a vicious law-and-order Democrat, had guided New York during the Reagan era, presiding over the financialization of the economy while using his trademark loudmouth demagoguery to deflect anger over growing inequality.

New York was the last of the nation’s 10 biggest cities to install a black mayor. Dinkins proceeded to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis—exactly as Coleman Young had done in Detroit, Kenneth Gibson in Newark, Harold Washington in Chicago and other mayors around the country. African-American officials were often installed to carry out the dictates of the ruling class, in exactly the same way and for exactly the same reasons that Joe Biden today is hailing a cabinet that “looks like America.”

Dinkins’ mayoralty was a time of rapidly growing inequality. Reagan’s cuts were part of a right-wing rampage by the ruling elite. In New York, heroin and crack cocaine epidemics, fueled by despair and the easy availability of drugs, led to a murder rate that saw close to 2,000 deaths annually, in turn leading to mass incarceration. All of this was bound up with continuing deindustrialization and the disappearance of decent jobs.

Dinkins, facing big budget deficits, obediently imposed austerity. His answer to the crisis facing the city was to hire more police. His answer to the budget crisis was to cut jobs and public services.

In 1989, Dinkins narrowly defeated Republican candidate Rudolph Giuliani, the same Giuliani in the headlines today seeking to overturn the election results on behalf of his fascist client, Donald Trump. In a 1993 rematch, Giuliani emerged victorious by an equally narrow margin, after a particularly vicious campaign that included leading a riot of off-duty police on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Dinkins explained his defeat by pointing to Giuliani’s undoubted exploitation of racism, covering up the fundamental reason—the disgust over social and economic conditions, exploited by Giuliani. Dinkins, as a representative of Wall Street, had no answers to the deepening social crisis. He was thrown out because of anger at the status quo—reasons not that different from those that

had allowed his fellow Democrat, Bill Clinton, to turn George H.W. Bush into a one-term president in 1992. Clinton then proceeded to escalate the rightwing “neo-liberal” trajectory of the Democratic Party, which it has continued to this day.

The DSA’s tributes to Dinkins are revealing because they demonstrate so clearly what the “socialism” of this organization is all about. The first article says that Dinkins’ legacy was “complex,” and that he was “forced into a defensive crouch.” The writer, Ross Barkan, insists that it would “not be exactly fair” to criticize Dinkins for presiding over rising inequality, since he was “checked by reactionary forces and a faltering economy.”

Thus, socialists should apparently bank on the assistance of reactionary forces and keep their fingers crossed hoping for a capitalist boom so that they are not forced to cut budgets and expand the police force!

The unstated premise behind this extraordinary argument is that in a period of economic and social crisis, a “socialist” must not implement any measures that infringe on the basic economic interests of the corporate-financial elite. In other words, there are no conditions that permit the establishment of socialism.

Barkan writes that at least Dinkins was finally able to achieve the goal of an independent Civilian Complaint Review Board to monitor the city’s cops. This CCRB has operated for the past three decades—including the years of mass arrests, police murders and stop-and-frisk abuse—as a toothless safety valve. This is indeed a fitting legacy for Dinkins, demonstrating that he changed absolutely nothing for the better as far as the city’s working class is concerned.

“Though Dinkins campaigned on anti-austerity aspirations, he was forced to implement devastating cuts when he took office,” Barkan writes. The same could be said for any Democrat. If Bernie Sanders had improbably been allowed to win the nomination and succeeded to the presidency, *Jacobin* would be shouting to the rooftops about Bernie being “forced to implement devastating cuts” and every other dictate of the ruling class.

In Giuliani, Dinkins faced an opponent who, according to the DSA, was a villain of almost superhuman proportions. The “Giuliani mythos” derived from his successful prosecution of organized crime in the 1980s. With the backing of the police unions, he was simply unstoppable, according to *Jacobin*.

Barkan writes, “No matter what Dinkins did for police, he could never, as a black man, earn their respect.” As if the job of a “socialist” mayor is to win the respect of the cops, the bodies of armed men whose job is to defend the system of private profit!

But that is precisely the point. Dinkins, like every other

Democrat, represents this system. That goes for the DSA Democrats, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and all of her lesser known colleagues. Even the most modest reforms cannot be fought for without confronting the capitalist class and its state, but politicians like Dinkins would no more consider this than jumping off the Empire State Building.

Both Barkan and Duhalde promote the racial identity politics that is the trademark of the pseudo-left, including the DSA. According to them, Dinkins’ skin color was key to his fate. Barkan calls Dinkins’ 1993 defeat the responsibility of “white conservatives” mobilized by Giuliani’s use of the “politics of racial resentment.” There is no mention of the Democrats’ own responsibility for the social counterrevolution that has taken place over the past 45 years.

Duhalde mourns the fact that “Dinkins’ New York City Rainbow Coalition only lasted one term.” According to this DSA staff writer, however, we must build on Dinkins’ efforts: the “legacy” of Dinkins “is one that democratic socialists interested in electoral politics should take seriously and study.” This is an absurd attempt to paint the Democratic Party in “socialist” colors. Dinkins’ Rainbow Coalition was, as is known by all, a government of Wall Street no less than the mayoralty of Giuliani that followed it.

The DSA’s political approach, as spelled out quite clearly here, is identical to the strategy of the entire Democratic Party. It is not fundamentally different from that of the unsuccessful Hillary Clinton campaign in 2016, or the successful Biden campaign. It is a strategy that is designed to split the working class.

The tributes to Dinkins in the pages of *Jacobin* are the clearest proof that the DSA exists only to trap youth and workers who are seeking a way to fight capitalism and preventing the working class from establishing its political independence. A genuine struggle for social equality, for socialism, can take place only through the exposure of the role of these pseudo-left defenders of capitalist inequality.



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