

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez denounces socialists and praises Biden administration, Democratic Party

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On March 19, the Democratic Socialists of America's magazine *Democratic Left* published an interview with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in which the Democratic congresswoman and DSA member combines the most lavish praise for the Democratic Party with vicious denunciations of socialism.

The DSA has treated the interview as an important political event. This is the first time their official magazine has interviewed the New York congresswoman, and the interview was carefully prepared before publication. Though *Democratic Left* editorial board member Don McIntosh conducted the interview on January 26, it was only posted online seven weeks later. The choice of interviewer is also significant: McIntosh is a high-level operative in the AFL-CIO with close ties to the Democratic Party. He is listed as an author on the AFL-CIO's press office website and is a long-time promoter of Democratic politicians and candidates at the *NW Labor Press*, which he edits.

In the interview, Ocasio-Cortez presents the Democratic Party as having been completely transformed into a working class party. She says the Biden administration and incumbent Democrats are "totally reinvent[ing] themselves in a far more progressive direction." Pressure from the left has forced "almost a radical change" among entrenched Democratic leaders. What is needed, she says, is a turn deeper into Democratic Party electoral politics.

The only barrier to the Democratic Party establishment achieving perfection is left-wing opposition. This politician who made a career criticizing the "Democratic establishment" and posturing as an outsider has now transformed herself into the establishment's fiercest defender and a most bitter opponent of outside critics.

McIntosh asks, "Some on the Left have looked at Biden's record and his difference with the Bernie wing of the party, and they conclude that no progress is going to come out of the Biden administration. What's your view?"

She replies:

Well, I think it's a really privileged critique. We're gonna have to focus on solidarity with one another, developing our senses for good faith critique and bad faith critique. Because bad faith critique can destroy everything that we have built so swiftly. And we know this because it has in the past, and it's taken us so many decades to get to

this point. We do not have the time or the luxury to entertain bad faith actors in our movement.

Such "bad faith actors," Ocasio-Cortez says, only betray their disdain for the poor and oppressed by criticizing the president. Ocasio-Cortez adds a noxious dose of identity politics to the old Democratic trick of presenting left-wing opponents as aiding the right:

For anyone who brings that up [i.e., opposition to the Biden administration], we really have to ask ourselves, what is the message that you are sending to your Black and brown and undocumented members of your community, to your friends, when you say nothing has changed?... When you say 'nothing has changed,' you are calling the people who are now protected from deportation 'no one.' And we cannot allow for that in our movement.

The example of protecting immigrants from deportation is an unfortunate selection on Ocasio-Cortez's part. In the weeks since the interview, Biden has suspended the right to asylum and deported tens of thousands of Central American refugees, denying them as much as a court hearing. Perhaps Ocasio-Cortez considers that the 15,000 children presently detained in immigration jails are "privileged bad faith actors" for opposing their own incarceration.

Ocasio-Cortez saves the most vituperative comments for the genuine socialist opponents of Biden. When asked, "What was your path to joining DSA?" Ocasio-Cortez responds by repeatedly stressing what makes the DSA "distinctive" from other socialist groups: "We felt like there wasn't this class essentialism, but that this really was a multiracial class struggle that didn't de-prioritize human rights, frankly, I was really impressed."

At the end of the interview, she praises a number of DSA members running for office as Democrats by saying, "They are people that you want to be around. And they are not cynical, and they do not engage in 'more socialist than thou.' They are just relentlessly positive."

The reference to "class essentialists deprioritizing human rights"

shows Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA are working in line with a definite political tradition: American anti-communism. Nothing socially progressive can emerge from this morass.

The Democratic Socialists of America has its origins in the 1982 merger of the New America Movement (NAM), a successor organization of the student protest group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee (DSOC), founded by Michael Harrington, who became the chairperson of the DSA upon its foundation.

Harrington's DSOC was explicitly politically rooted in post-war Shachtmanism, the tendency led by Polish-born ex-revolutionary Max Shachtman, while the NAM's predecessor, the SDS, had been the youth wing of the Shachtmanite-dominated League for Industrial Democracy (LID) until the organizations split in 1965.

Max Shachtman joined the communist movement in 1923 and co-founded the American section of the Trotskyist Left Opposition alongside James P. Cannon after the Stalinists expelled sympathizers of Trotsky in 1928.

After breaking with the American Trotskyists in 1939-40, Shachtman drifted far to the right. Under the pressure of the post-war boom, his earlier, principled fight against the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union was transformed into the anti-Marxist position that the Soviet Union was a "bureaucratic collectivist" regime, and that the bureaucracy was a new ruling class whose human rights violations justified socialist support for American imperialism in the cold war. He rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and ended his career as an adviser of the AFL-CIO and a supporter of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Vietnam War.

Harrington was a supporter of Shachtman, and both served on the board of directors of the League for Industrial Democracy. At the SDS's founding, Harrington pressed the group to take a more explicitly anti-communist position against the Soviet Union and national liberation movements like the Vietcong: "Anti-Communism was Harrington's emotional touchstone," Todd Gitlin writes in *The Sixties*. "He had formed his politics with the brilliant and bitter Max Shachtman."

This orientation primarily served the foreign policy interests of US imperialism. Harrington would later demand that socialist organizations play "a pro-American, Cold War, State Department kind of role."

They functioned entirely within the Democratic Party. Harrington, Shachtman and SDS each supported Democratic "realignment," which argued that American foreign policy interests could be served by breaking with the southern segregationists from the Democratic Party and reorienting toward the trade union bureaucracy and the upper-middle class. Though Shachtman urged an approach to the AFL-CIO, Harrington called for the adoption of early forms of identity politics. Peter Drucker explains in his book *Max Shachtman and His Left*:

Mike Harrington became the leader of ex-Shachtmanite Socialists who refused to concede the dominant role in the Democratic coalition to the AFL-CIO. He looked instead for compromises between labor leaders and representatives

of 'New Politics,' a loose network of progressives, mostly Latino, feminist, youth, countercultural and anti-war ferment of the 1960s. He drifted away from Shachtman's version of Marxist orthodoxy... The differences among Socialists were enmeshed in divisions in the Democratic Party. The realignment strategy, which Shachtman had imagined would allow socialists to work together effectively inside the Democratic Party, turned out to be a formula for forcing them to choose between rival Democratic politicians fighting for primary votes and inner-party offices.

In fact, Harrington formed DSOC in 1973 out of a minority caucus in the Socialist Party of America which criticized the majority for insufficiently supporting Democratic candidate George McGovern in the 1972 presidential election.

From then on, the DSOC and DSA have been engaged in a continuous effort to pressure the Democratic Party from within. The DSA's own website acknowledges the organization waged a "Democracy '76" campaign to push Jimmy Carter to the left, it "worked in the 1984 Democratic presidential primary," and it "worked closely with the Congressional Progressive Caucus" throughout the 1990s.

And what does the DSA have to show for a half century of working within the Democratic Party? The party has abandoned any pretense to social reform, it has waged permanent war and overseen a massive growth in social inequality. The "realignment" strategy paved the way for the Democratic Party's rapid movement ever further to the right. It succeeded in facilitating the Democrats' adoption of identity politics, based on doling out privileged positions to corrupt representatives of various racial groups, and a more open acceptance of human rights imperialism.

Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA are carrying forward their pro-imperialist, anti-communist traditions into the 21st century. Their main role, as expressed in the interview, is to serve as gatekeepers of the bourgeois political left, channeling social opposition into the Democratic Party and placing its left opponents beyond the pale. Those who fight to mobilize the working class ("class essentialism") for a break with the Democratic Party are "cynical bad faith actors" who want to "destroy."

But the frenzied tone of these McCarthyite attacks betrays a high level of anxiety in leading Democratic Party circles over the growth of social opposition to conditions of massive inequality and the ruling class's response to the pandemic, which has killed over 550,000 in the US alone. Under these conditions, Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA serve as the keystone in the architecture of the capitalist political system. This is a lesson of the reactionary role played by the political tradition that calls itself "democratic socialism," which really has nothing to do with socialism at all.



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