The Democratic Party and the political origins of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Eric London
29 March 2021

In an interview with the Democratic Socialists of America magazine *Democratic Left* published on March 21, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez attacked socialist critics of the Biden administration as "privileged" and "bad faith actors," while praising the Democratic Party for "totally reinvent[ing] themselves in a far more progressive direction." She specifically denounced "class essentialists," restating the anti-communist trope that genuine socialists "de-prioritize human rights."

Ocasio-Cortez's defense of the right wing of the Democratic Party against socialist opposition reveals her role in preempting the development of a movement of the working class independent of the two-party system. She is the latest iteration of a strategy, developed by the Democratic Party over 200 years of political experience, to present a "left" face in order to trap social opposition, prop up the capitalist order and carry out ruthless attacks on the working class in the US and internationally. Fundamental lessons must be drawn from this experience.

The historical role of the Democratic Party

The origins of Ocasio-Cortez and her attacks against the socialist left must be understood in the political and historical context of the historical role of the Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party has a vast experience in diverting social opposition by trapping social discontent within its reach, where it is crushed. It has at its disposal billions of dollars, mass media channels and thousands of people whose singular responsibility is to stop social opposition from breaking out of its control.

This has been its political role since its inception in 1828, when Andrew Jackson trapped the embryonic anti-capitalism of "workingmen" in the northern cities behind a reactionary alliance with the southern slave-owning class. The emergence of the working class in the post-Civil War period inaugurated decades of violent class struggle, which the Democratic Party attempted to control through subsuming strains of populist, agrarian politics, culminating in the elevation of the demagogue William Jennings Bryan as repeated Democratic presidential candidate at the turn of the 20th century. Despite the insurrectionary character of the class struggle, the Democratic Party fought to prevent these struggles from developing to a point of a political break and the formation of an independent political party in the European model of labor or social democratic parties. This, alongside the extraordinary wealth of American capitalism, explains why there has never been a labor party in the United States.

This reached a new stage in the period following the Great Depression, when a wave of semi-insurrectionary strikes and social struggles broke out under the leadership of socialists. The administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, aware of the example of the Russian Revolution of 1917, introduced New Deal social reforms to prevent the workers' movement from developing in opposition to the capitalist system. This was critical for preparing American imperialism's entry into World War II, opening up a period of imperialist domination worldwide. John F. Kennedy's New Frontier and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society portrayed the Democratic Party as "left" in order to temper social discontent at home and facilitate a massive expansion of imperialist plunder abroad.

The financial crisis of 2008-09 produced a new wave of social radicalization, leading the Democratic Party to present Barack Obama as the candidate of "hope and change," a former "community organizer" whose race supposedly made him a natural ally of the oppressed.

As opposition to the right-wing character of Obama's presidency grew, Bernie Sanders then emerged from 30 years on the Democratic congressional backbench as a "socialist" candidate in the party primary who promised "political revolution." In 2016, he became a lightning rod for social discontent, winning over 10 million votes, mostly from workers and youth. His sudden rise to popularity shocked the Democratic Party and served as a warning that the population was moving rapidly to the left and was attracted to socialism. Sanders, who had criticized Hillary Clinton as the stooge of Wall Street, endorsed her campaign, leading to the disillusionment of many of his supporters.

It was in the aftermath of the 2016 primary elections that the Democratic Socialists of America rose to prominence. There were repeated articles in the corporate media promoting the organization, leading to a substantial growth in its membership. The DSA and other left groupings within the Democratic Party began to recruit candidates for the 2018 election cycle. It was in this context that Ocasio-Cortez was selected as a candidate for Democratic office.

The creation of Ocasio-Cortez's story

Ocasio-Cortez was one of the candidates who were selected by these Democratic Party organizations in advance of the 2018 mid-term election cycle. Brand New Congress and Justice Democrats received hundreds of submissions of prospective candidates from across the country to run in primary elections against incumbent Democrats. Ocasio-Cortez acknowledged that she underwent six months of "vetting" before being chosen as a candidate.

Brand New Congress and Justice Democrats selected Ocasio-Cortez because her "story" fit the mold they were looking for. She is a Latina, born to a working-class family of Puerto Rican immigrants in the Bronx. Her father died in 2008 when Ocasio-Cortez was in only her second year of college, and her mother almost lost the family home to foreclosure. She had worked as a bartender for several months after college. She also lived in a district with an incumbent, Joe Crowley, who epitomized the marriage

© World Socialist Web Site

between corporations and the political establishment and had next to no support in the heavily working-class district.

But Ocasio-Cortez had no history of substantial involvement in any social struggles. There is no record that she was particularly interested in radical politics, let alone socialism, before being selected as a primary candidate.

On the contrary, in college Ocasio-Cortez served as an intern in the foreign affairs office of Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy, who was the sponsor of the right-wing No Child Left Behind policy, an anti-public education campaign initiated by the George W. Bush administration. Kennedy openly identified himself with the most right-wing education policies throughout his later years in the Senate.

The National Hispanic Institute, where Ocasio-Cortez also worked, later described her role as a contributor to the group's magazine, a leader of educational training sessions and a "consultant to NHI founder and President Ernesto Nieto." When she was younger, she also mentored young people.

She was also an aspiring entrepreneur. The *Times of Israel* reported in December 2020 that after graduating from college, Ocasio-Cortez worked for Gage Strategies, a corporation run by two Israeli capitalists, Joe Raby and Cheni Yerushalmi, who the *Times* explains are "associated more with the world of venture capital and startups than with the working class."

A Boston University alumni page describes her as an "educational strategist at GAGEis, Inc." who appears to have been an aspiring corporate leader. Her "primary interests lie in entrepreneurship and developing innovative, healthy, enterprising communities for generations to come," the BU page reads.

The *Times of Israel* indicates that the two Israeli venture capitalists may have played a role in her professional advancement: "It was under the aegis of these men that Ocasio-Cortez prepared curricula teaching entrepreneurial and self-presentation skills to ambitious young college students and graduates in the Bronx. These skills, which she helped teach to others, may have been instrumental in her own political rise."

One of the Israeli venture capitalists, Joe Raby, oversaw admission to the Sunshine Bronx business incubator, which also provided Ocasio-Cortez space for a company she founded called Brook Avenue Press. This was a publishing company for children's books, though it is not clear whether the business ever published a book. While working in the Sunshine Bronx business incubator, Ocasio-Cortez was photographed in 2012 with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr., both prominent Democrats.

Ocasio-Cortez was quoted in a press release celebrating the "business incubator" saying:

> Plenty of entrepreneurs have started their businesses on a shoestring and any break they receive means more flexibility for further growth. A tax break could mean part-time work for someone else or keeping a business' doors open long enough to turn a profit. Young entrepreneurs are playing a special role in developing promising, creative enterprises for our future and a small break can open up their resources for hiring, creating a new product, or reinvesting in the local economy.

This milquetoast record posed a challenge to the creation of an image of Ocasio-Cortez as the champion of working people and icon of socialism. Therefore, the Democratic Party conjured up that meaningless label—"community organizer"—to present her as somehow connected to social struggles. This ploy was last used by the Democratic Party to provide Barack Obama, the drone warrior and deporter-in-chief with a mysterious background and connections to intelligence agencies, with street bona fides.

In the March 21 interview with *Democratic Left*, Ocasio-Cortez explained how she joined the DSA:

> What initially drew me to DSA was the fact that they showed up everywhere that I showed up. I started my work as a community organizer before I even knew about the existence of DSA, and I was busy doing work in my community, working with children, working with families, advocating for educational equity.

This sheds light on the milieu in which the DSA operates. Since Ocasio-Cortez spent her post-college years in the orbit of the Democratic Party and corporate startup world, it is no wonder the DSA "showed up everywhere I showed up."

The DSA, like Ocasio-Cortez, has no connection to the struggles of the working class, let alone socialism. Since the founding of its predecessor, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), in 1972 and the DSA in 1982, the organization has existed as a continuous presence within the Democratic Party. For fifty years, its operatives have attended Democratic National Conventions, worked as staff for Democratic Party politicians and trade unions, and fought for a "realignment" within the party.

Over this time period, the Democratic Party has turned further to the right, abandoning any pretense at social reform. All the while, the DSA has served as a left shield for the Democrats' rightward maneuvers, assuring the population that the Democratic Party can be reformed as it launches imperialist wars across the world and eviscerates social programs and corporate regulations.

The DSA provides Ocasio-Cortez her "socialist" credentials

The DSA's role in facilitating the rise of Ocasio-Cortez testifies to its function within the Democratic Party. In the absence of any association with social struggles, it was the DSA which provided the young Democrat and aspiring entrepreneur with a "socialist" imprimatur. This was necessary not only for Ocasio-Cortez's "story," it also allowed the Democratic Party to de-fang the word "socialism," translate it into a byword for Democratic Party pressure politics, and orient workers and young people away from genuine socialism based in the working class.

Ocasio-Cortez acknowledges in the interview with *Democratic Left* that she joined "around the time when DSA was picketing one of the major camera companies in New York City, trying to call attention to the warehouse workers." This is apparently a reference to DSA pickets of B&H Photo Video stores in Brooklyn that, according to DSA announcements, took place beginning in April 2017.

The timing is significant because, if these dates are correct, it indicates that Ocasio-Cortez joined the DSA only *after* she was selected by the Democratic Party PAC Brand New Congress as a candidate for Congress. On her personal Facebook page, she announced she was nominated by Brand New Congress to run for Congress on April 1, 2017, which by her account was before she began attending DSA meetings.

Press reports of the DSA's decision to endorse Ocasio-Cortez's campaign indicate the move was critical to providing her campaign with a ready-made political infrastructure required to run a congressional campaign. *New York* magazine wrote, "While [Ocasio-Cortez] wasn't incubated in DSA, she started appearing at meetings and joined the organization, securing its endorsement and grassroots manpower."

© World Socialist Web Site

Gotham Gazette described this process in greater detail, explaining what took place after Ocasio-Cortez received the approval of the New York City DSA's Electoral Working Group:

> Once she'd received the approval of the Electoral Working Group, different organizational branches, and, ultimately, the citywide group, Ocasio-Cortez gained access to NYC-DSA's veritable army of canvassers. NYC-DSA members knocked on "thousands of doors" throughout District 14 in support of Ocasio-Cortez, collected voter data, and assisted with funding.

Vetting and training a Democratic politician

An important example of the type of Democratic Party operative who works within the DSA to recruit, vet and train prospects for political leadership is Ocasio-Cortez adviser Nomiki Konst. Konst is a self-described DSA member who lived in New York City at the time of Ocasio-Cortez's candidacy.

In late March 2017, right before she announced her selection as a Brand New Congress candidate, Ocasio-Cortez attended a conference of the New York Progressive Action Network, a group within the Democratic Party in New York. This event featured speeches by Democratic Party candidates for office, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, and Nomiki Konst, a member of the 2016 Democratic National Convention platform committee.

Konst was also present in early April when Ocasio-Cortez was flown to Frankfort, Kentucky to participate in a Democratic Party leadership training session to prepare her for her Democratic primary campaign. Ocasio-Cortez posted that, in addition to Konst, an unnamed Democratic congressperson also participated.

Konst's presence at Ocasio-Cortez's political genesis is significant since Konst has high-level ties to the national security apparatus. She was a "millennial thought leader" with the Truman National Security Project, which calls for developing "tough" new national security leaders. Its website declares it is "building the next generation in national security" by working to recruit young leaders and develop them as politicians.

Konst's role is an example of the types of high-level state operatives the Democratic Party and DSA employ in such "leadership development" projects. Ocasio-Cortez herself acknowledged that she was "vetted" for six months before receiving the Brand New Congress nomination. The intelligence agencies are careful to ensure that nobody acquires a position of government power who is not completely reliable on questions of imperialist foreign policy and statecraft.

According to independent journalist Dan Cohen, the Truman National Security Project is a "Democratic party-aligned, pro-war think tank that helped groom noted revolutionary leaders like Pete Buttigieg and Michele Flournoy." Cohen also reported that Konst was deployed to Libya during the brutal US-led military intervention:

> Self-described leftist Nomiki Konst spent time training the Islamist opposition in Libya after the NATO intervention that deposed Moammar Gaddafi and saw him murdered in the streets by jihadist proxies after NATO drones attacked his motorcade. Konst traveled to Libya thanks to the National Democratic Institute, one of the subsidiaries of the very same CIA cutout, the National Endowment for Democracy, that funds Bellingcat.

In a 2019 profile of Konst, Politico noted that "her life remains occluded by indecision." Politico reported that a Truman Center spokesperson said Konst was the "West Coast Managing Director of Partnerships" for the Truman National Security Project, noting that her "bio has since been deleted." Konst told Politico, "It literally means nothing … these organizations are nothing. They just basically go around the country and try to get young people involved and come to their conferences."

Politico also reported Konst's work in Libya, though it noted that "after Politico asked her for details on this particular claim, she had yet to provide any."

It appears that Ocasio-Cortez and Konst stayed in contact. Shortly after Ocasio-Cortez won the Democratic primary in June 2018, Konst posted a video of Ocasio-Cortez's victory speech from the floor of the campaign's victory party. Konst has been a consistent promoter of Ocasio-Cortez's tenure in Congress.

Lessons must be drawn

Ocasio-Cortez presently turns her fire on left-wing opponents of the Biden administration, denouncing them as "bad faith actors" on behalf of the Democratic Party. The forum for her attacks is the pages of the DSA's official magazine. For the last two years, she has been allowed to build up her left credentials, growing her social media influence and facilitating her ability to communicate with masses of people, especially socialist-minded youth. But her political supervisors are now ordering her to crack down on her own supporters, who have responded with bitter disappointment and anger.

It is likely that Ocasio-Cortez will tack left again, and it is inevitable that new Democratic politicians will emerge from the sidelines to present themselves as the next left alternative. It is also inevitable that some will even abstain from using the label "Democrat" because the term is so tainted.

Socialists must fortify themselves against the next traps by drawing the lessons from the last one:

A genuine socialist movement will not be born out of the Democratic Party. All pragmatic arguments for using the Democratic ballot line, for appealing to the better angels of reactionary Democratic politicians, and for an "inside-out" strategy—partly inside the Democratic Party and partly pressuring it from without—clash with the historical role played by this party in the defense of the capitalist system.

The Democratic Party is an imperialist party representing the financial oligarchy. It is accountable to the military, the intelligence agencies, the banks and the corporations. At times it presents itself in progressive terms, but only to better block the growth of a genuine socialist movement. It is irreconcilably hostile to the interests of the working class, full stop, and that will never change.

This experience shows that a serious approach to politics requires a serious approach to learning the lessons of history. The working class requires its own party, basing itself on the whole historical experience of the struggle for socialism. That party is the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party in the United States.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site