

Praising the crimes of Stalinism: The DSA and the assassination of Leon Trotsky

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During the past week, numerous prominent leaders of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have posted tweets celebrating the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky and portraying the murderer, the Stalinist GPU agent Ramon Mercader, as a hero.

Many of the tweets by DSA leaders are illustrated with photos and memes of an alpenstock, the weapon used by Mercader to murder Trotsky. Nickan Fayyazi, a member of the National Coordinating Committee of the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA), presents one such photo with the caption “this might come in handy today.”

Asheville, North Carolina DSA member Dan Pozzie proposes erecting a memorial to Trotsky’s assassin, reading, “In memory of Ramon Mercader: He showed us the way.” A tweet by a recent DSA East Bay, California Steering Committee member reads, “Ice pick jokes will never not be funny,” and “we will all continue making ice pick jokes publicly + unapologetically.”

The tweets are part of a coordinated response by a substantial section of DSA officials to the growing readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the online publication of the Trotskyist International Committee of the Fourth International, among rank-and-file members of the DSA.

In March and April, a *World Socialist Web Site* article exposing DSA member and Democratic Congressperson Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s statement denouncing criticism of the Biden administration as “bad faith” recorded over 100,000 distinct readers, including thousands of DSA members. Anxiety over the impact of the WSWS’s criticism of the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy was exacerbated by the failure of the AFL-CIO’s unionization drive at the Amazon facility in Bessemer, Alabama in April.

The DSA members celebrating Trotsky’s assassination include elected national office holders and leaders of its youth wing (YDSA), branch chairs, leaders of campus clubs and prominent DSA podcasters, as well as contributors to the *Guardian* and DSA-affiliated media outlets such as *Jacobin* magazine.

Those who are tweeting sick jokes about Trotsky’s murder are circulating the political equivalent of pornography. They are not only laughing about the murder of one of the towering figures in the history of twentieth century socialism, they are solidarizing themselves with the campaign of mass murder carried out by Stalin’s totalitarian regime.

The fact that such individuals hold leadership positions within the DSA should be taken as a serious warning by rank-and-file members and supporters of this organization. In politics, people are judged by what they do. Individuals who solidarize themselves with the crimes of Stalin have absolutely nothing to with genuine left-wing politics. The trajectory of their politics is not toward socialism, but toward supporting state repression against the socialist movement.

From the standpoint of the international class struggle and the fate of socialism, Trotsky’s assassination on August 20, 1940 was the most consequential political crime of the twentieth century. His murder deprived the international working class of the last surviving leader of the

1917 October Revolution and the greatest strategist of world socialist revolution. Trotsky played a monumental role in the struggle for world socialism, as a theoretician, orator, writer, organizer of the seizure of power by the working class, leader of the Red Army, implacable opponent of Stalinism, founder of the Fourth International, and socialist visionary of a world liberated from all forms of oppression. The study and assimilation of Trotsky’s vast legacy are essential for the preparation of the victory of socialism in the twenty-first century.

But Trotsky was not the only victim of Stalinism. His assassination was the culmination of a wave of Stalinist terror launched in 1936 with the first of three Moscow Trials. During the Great Terror of 1936-40, the Stalinist regime murdered an estimated one million revolutionary workers, intellectuals and artists. An entire generation of Marxists and socialists who had played a decisive role in the preparation, leadership and defense of the 1917 October Revolution—including virtually all of Lenin’s closest comrades—was murdered. The Great Terror, which precisely targeted those prominently identified as socialists for extermination, has been correctly described as politically directed genocide.

Leading participants in this right-wing campaign

What follows is a small sample of the scores of tweets by DSA members celebrating Trotsky’s murder. Those retweeting or “liking” these posts comprise a Rolodex of the DSA leadership.

The aforementioned post by Nickan Fayyazi, a member of the YDSA’s National Coordinating Committee leadership body and co-chair of the YDSA’s UC Berkeley chapter, presents a photo of an ice pick with the caption “this might come in handy today,” alongside other vulgar language. This was retweeted by Dary Rezvani, a prominent member of the Los Angeles DSA.

The tweet about the ice pick was “liked” by over 100 people, including many DSA members, as well as the following DSA leaders and prominent members:

- *Jacobin* contributor Gabriel Patrick
- New York City DSA Steering Committee member Jake Colosa
- University of Virginia DSA organizer Madison Perry
- Baltimore DSA labor organizer Ryan Kekeris
- Champlain Valley, Vermont DSA organizer Alex Lawson
- DSA Los Angeles Labor Committee member Michael Lumpkin
- Co-chair of the Knox College, Illinois YDSA Matt Milewski
- Lower Manhattan DSA Organizing Committee member Honda Wang
- Chicago DSA member and podcaster Kenzo Shibata
- Brandon Henriquez, co-chair of the DSA’s Silicon Valley branch

A separate post by Washington D.C. DSA member Ben Davis features a drawing of Mercader preparing to carry out his attack on Trotsky. It shows

the assassin holding an ice pick above Trotsky's head as the latter works at his desk. It bears the caption: "Clear out the wreckers." Davis worked for Bernie Sanders' campaign in 2020 as a data analyst and has written for the British *Guardian* newspaper, which describes Davis as someone who "works in political data in Washington D.C."

This post was also "liked" by a number of DSA members.

The term "wreckers," drawn from the vocabulary of Stalinism, has distinct political implications. "Trotskyite wreckers" was a term employed by Stalin to justify the mass murder of Trotskyists and opponents of the Stalinist regime, based on the lying claim that they engaged in terrorism and sabotage. It featured prominently in the three Moscow frame-up trials and was used to justify the slander that Trotsky and his supporters were agents of fascism. On March 29, 1937, in the lead-up to the second Moscow Trial, Stalin gave a speech titled "Deficiencies in Party Work and Measures for Liquidating Trotskyites." In the course of the speech, Stalin employed the term "Trotskyite wreckers" 16 times.

Another tweet, by former DSA National Electoral Committee member Nate Knauf, includes the same drawing depicting Trotsky's assassination, accompanied by the words, "That's right!!!" This post was "liked" by Ben Davis, Knox College YDSA's Matt Milewski, New York DSA's Ganeev Chichagov, and YDSA Purdue Co-Chair Mason Wyss, among others.

An additional thread posted by a recent DSA East Bay Steering Committee member was "liked" by Guy Brown, a member of the DSA National Political Education Committee and co-chair of the Charlotte Metro DSA; Maura Quint, a DSA supporter and contributor at the *New Yorker* and the *Hill*; and an unidentified member of the Portland DSA's steering committee.

In a separate post, Southwest Florida DSA and Florida Gulf Coast University YDSA member Morgan Kirk tweeted a meme about Trotsky's death.

The following DSA leaders "liked" this post:

- DSA National Political Committee member Blanca Estevez
- YDSA National Coordinating Committee member Nate Stewart
- DSA Immigration Rights Group Co-Chair Alexander Hernandez
- DSA National Electoral Committee member Austin Binns
 - University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana YDSA Co-Chair Niko Johnson-Fuller
- Co-chair of the DSA's branch in Erie, Pennsylvania, Cole Schenley
- DSA New York City Organizing Committee member Kayleen Pena.

The role of Democratic Party operatives

Most of those posting, retweeting or "liking" these tweets are active members of the Democratic Party or officers of the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy. These include:

- YDSA leader Nickan Fayyazi, who is a legislative intern for Democratic Berkeley City Council member Kate Harrison and a student government representative.
- DSA Los Angeles member Dary Rezvani, who was a 2020 Democratic primary candidate for the 22nd Congressional District in California, and later that year was the Democratic Party-endorsed candidate for Community College District Trustee in Fresno, California. He lost both elections.
 - NYC DSA member Andrey Ganeev Chichagov, whose LinkedIn profile states that he is a member of the New York City Democratic Party County Committee and was office manager for Democratic New York State Senator Julia Salazar.
 - Ryan Kekeris, who is the communications director of the International

Union of Painters and Allied Trades. In 2019, this trade union executive made \$99,367, according to Labor Department filings.

- Prominent Chicago DSA podcaster Kenzo Shibata, who is a Chicago Teachers Union Executive Board member and was formerly the Illinois Federation of Teachers media director. Labor Department filings show he made \$142,817 in 2017 as a union executive.

- YDSA leader Nate Stewart, who is an elected member of the Democratic Party Executive Committee in Dover, New Hampshire, and a delegate to the New Hampshire Democratic Party.

- Washington D.C. DSA's Brad Chester, who was regional field director for Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign in the Metropolitan D.C. area and is a longtime Democratic operative, working on the staff of the Virginia and Texas Democratic Parties and on various Democratic campaigns. He authored an essay titled "Breaking Bad: How Obsession with an Independent Workers' Party Hurts the Socialist Electoral Project."

- Joshua Armstead, who is vice president of the UNITE HERE Local 23 D.C. chapter.

- Tasneem Al-Michael, who is vice president of the College Democrats of America and national college caucus chair of the Young Democrats of America.

One DSA member who also "liked" such tweets is New York City DSA Organizing Committee member Honda Wang, a leading anti-Trotskyist within the DSA. Wang regularly posts attacks on the WSWS. The comments section of his TikTok videos attacking the WSWS are filled with commenters posting images of alpenstocks.

Wang's politics and his past as a political consultant for Schoen Consulting give a sense of the type of right-wing Democratic Party operatives directing the DSA's attacks on the WSWS.

On his LinkedIn profile, Wang explains that when working for Schoen, he "consulted on strategy and communications for political clients in both domestic and international markets," and "advised corporate clients in a wide range of sectors."

Wang does not list the governments, politicians, state agencies and corporations with which he has worked, but Schoen Consulting's clients now include billionaire Michael Bloomberg and his Independence PAC, a private fund for buying political support, as well as Walmart.

A public report on Schoen Consulting explains that the clientele of its founder, Bill Clinton advisor Paul Schoen, includes:

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (NY), New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine, and Indiana Governor Evan Bayh, and his corporate clients have included Walmart, AOL Time Warner, Procter & Gamble and AT&T. Internationally, he has worked for the heads of state of over 15 countries, including British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, and three Israeli Prime Ministers. Schoen helped introduce Victor Pinchuk, Ukraine oligarch, financier, and former member of Parliament, to philanthropic and political groups that have made him an international figure who now serves on the boards of the Peterson Center for International Economics, the International Crisis Group and the Clinton Foundation.

Wang's career as a Democratic Party operative shows that the Democratic Party and AFL-CIO apparatchiks who comprise the DSA leadership identify in Trotsky a threat to their own material position and to the capitalist system. Undoubtedly, there are other provocateurs not named here who are also motivating these attacks behind the scenes from within the Democratic Party.

The neo-Stalinist politics of the DSA

The Democratic Party is an imperialist-capitalist party and is rabidly anti-socialist. Why, then, are its operatives within the DSA—which claims to be a variety of anti-Stalinist socialism—glorifying the crimes of Stalinism and recycling its slanders against Trotsky?

To understand the political logic that underlies this apparent contradiction, it is necessary to review the historical context of the Stalinist terror of the 1930s and its relationship to American politics during the era of Roosevelt's New Deal. That period was the heyday of the political alliance between a substantial section of Democratic Party liberals and the Stalinist American Communist Party. This alliance was known as the Popular Front, which was devised by the Kremlin—in the aftermath of Hitler's rise to power in Germany—to draw the democratic imperialist governments of Europe and the United States into an alliance with the Soviet Union. In return for more favorable diplomatic relations with these imperialist states, the Soviet regime and the national Communist parties under its control would support bourgeois governments and suppress working-class struggles against capitalism.

One of Stalin's central aims in the Moscow Trials and the Terror was to convince the "Western Democracies" that the Soviet Union had broken decisively with Bolshevism and the Lenin-Trotsky perspective of world socialist revolution.

The class-collaborationist policies of the Popular Front led to the victory of the fascistic Franco dictatorship in 1939 in Spain, and, in 1940, the establishment of the Vichy regime in France.

In the United States, the American Communist Party enthusiastically promoted the Roosevelt administration. Democratic Party liberals increasingly viewed Stalin as a valuable ally and endorsed his extermination of the Old Bolsheviks.

As is well known, leading left-liberal publications such as the *New Republic* and the *Nation* endorsed the Moscow Trials, confirming Trotsky's classification of the Popular Front as "democracy in alliance with the GPU." Prominent artists, writers and intellectuals—such as Lillian Hellman, Louis Fischer, Freda Kirchwey and Malcolm Cowley—declared their confidence in the integrity of the Moscow witch trials, although the only evidence presented against the defendants was their own dubious "confessions." They bitterly attacked the American philosopher John Dewey for agreeing to serve as chairman of the Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials. Subsequently, they denounced the Commission's findings that Trotsky was innocent of all charges against him and that the Moscow Trials were a frame-up.

The Democratic Party is once again threatened by a growing movement of the working class. It recognizes and fears that the radicalization of youth and the working class can lead, unless diverted, toward a break with capitalist politics and, therefore, a serious movement for socialism.

The Democratic Party employs the DSA to prevent this development.

In this context it is significant that the two issues which triggered the Democratic Party and DSA leadership's attacks on Trotsky were the WSWs's exposure of Ocasio-Cortez, which led significant numbers of DSA members to write to the WSWs expressing support for our criticisms, and the increasingly prominent role played by the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party in strikes and social struggles taking place across the country. The DSA and the Democratic Party view the defeat of the AFL-CIO's unionization effort at Bessemer, Alabama and recent votes by workers rejecting sellout contracts as warning signs that efforts to create a state-controlled labor movement are coming into conflict with profound hostility within the working class to the pro-corporate AFL-CIO.

The Democratic Party defensively turns to the lies of the Moscow Trials, filtering them through the DSA to poison the political atmosphere against genuine socialism. They recognize that Trotskyism, represented today by

the SEP and WSWs, is the political force giving conscious expression to growing socialist sentiment in the working class and among the youth.

No organization that calls itself progressive, let alone socialist, can tolerate the legitimization of the crimes of Stalinism and the GPU. That these crimes are being hailed by a significant section of the DSA's leadership exposes the presence of a deeply reactionary and vile political culture within the organization.

At a time when right-wing violence is a growing threat against the left, it is the obligation of socialists to defend those threatened with political violence by far-right and fascistic forces. Despite our clear opposition to the politics of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the WSWs has consistently defended her and her staff from ongoing threats of violence by fascists, who attempted to kill her during the coup attempt of January 6, 2021.

The DSA now has a political obligation to make clear that the propagation of lies that legitimize and encourage violence against left-wing and socialist opponents of the Democratic Party will not be permitted within its organization. Local branches of the DSA should pass resolutions denouncing the anti-Trotskyist slanders. They should demand that the upcoming national convention issue an unequivocal denunciation of the neo-Stalinist campaign.

We urge all members of the DSA who are seriously interested in history, theory and the politics of socialism and Marxism to read the works of Leon Trotsky, who ranks alongside Lenin as the greatest fighter for socialist revolution in the twentieth century.

The World Socialist Web Site recommends that DSA members read In Defense of Leon Trotsky, by David North, the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWs and the national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US). This book provides a comprehensive refutation of Stalinist lies directed against Leon Trotsky.



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