

The DSA Convention 2021: The banality of pseudo-left Democratic Party politics

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The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) held its biennial convention this year between August 1 and August 8. The meeting was notable above all for the complacency and banality that prevailed throughout, which conforms to the character of the organization as an appendage of the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus.

Since the DSA's last convention in 2019, a global pandemic has killed more than 4.4 million people, according to official figures, including nearly 650,000 people in the United States. The previous Trump administration sought to overturn democratic forms of rule, culminating in the attempted fascistic coup of January 6.

The Biden administration has come to power and is continuing, in all its essentials, the policies of the Trump administration, particularly on the pandemic. With the assistance of the trade unions, the Democratic Party is spearheading a campaign to reopen schools, even as the Delta variant of the coronavirus has led to a sharp rise in new COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths among children.

The DSA convention did not attempt to address any of these developments or, in fact, discuss seriously anything at all. As the WSWs has previously analyzed, the DSA draft platform for the convention, which was adopted by unanimous consent, makes no criticisms of the Democratic Party, barely mentions the pandemic and does not contain a single reference to Trump's efforts to overturn the results of the election. The convention followed along the same lines.

Aside from "Socialist Labor Organizing Through the Pandemic," there was not a single session that even mentioned the pandemic in its headline, and it was the exception that proved the rule. The session was not devoted to a review of the homicidal policies of the ruling class that have produced and continue to produce mass

death, but rather promoted the DSA's close relations with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU).

Under conditions in which workers are attempting to break free from the control of the trade unions—as in the recent Volvo Trucks strike, where workers established a rank-and-file committee to oppose the joint conspiracy of the UAW and the company—the DSA is doing everything it can to bolster the corporatist unions.

"Using Elected Office to Build Socialism" and "Electing Socialists: Waging and Winning Class Struggle Campaigns" featured the various DSA members and DSA-backed candidates who are in local and national office as representatives of the Democratic Party. Several sessions were used to promote racial politics, including "Building a multiracial socialist movement" and a session on the "abolitionist strategy" of the DSA.

Sara Nelson, the head of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA and a DSA member, was due to speak at the opening session but cancelled at the last minute. Nelson had been rumored as a possible successor for Richard Trumka, who died on August 5, in the middle of the DSA convention. On Saturday, the AFL-CIO announced that it was selecting Liz Shuler, the current secretary-treasurer, as president.

The resolutions adopted were largely aimed at more firmly committing the DSA to promoting the Democratic Party. One resolved to make "electoral politics a priority for the next two years," and reaffirmed the DSA's commitment to running and supporting candidates "on the Democratic ballot line." An amendment to commit the DSA to a "dirty break" with the Democratic Party—a fiction promoted by factions of the DSA aligned with *Jacobin*—was rejected.

In his own comment on the convention ("Reflections on the 2021 DSA National Convention"), David Duhalde,

one of the main political leaders of the DSA and vice chair of the DSA Fund, praised the delegates for rejecting any, even meaningless verbal commitment to eventually breaking with the Democratic Party. “As the new DSA matures,” he wrote, “a consensus seems to be building that emphasizing a ‘break’ with Democrats *per se* can be alienating to voters we need to win over and put DSA-backed elected officials in a difficult position.”

Duhalde added, “If DSA had asked elected officials to not endorse [Biden in the 2020 elections], this likely would have alienated the organization from officeholders rather than producing non-endorsements.” This spells out the real issue fairly. The DSA is not concerned with “alienating” the organization from “voters”—who are increasingly disaffected with the entire political structure—but “alienating” itself from “officeholders,” that is, with capitalist politicians.

The complete unseriousness of the whole event is significant in itself. At one session, a panelist was drinking beer throughout. Another session was organized around a “telethon,” complete with the fundraisers pretending to talk on the phone. Every session was led and conducted at the lowest possible level.

One panel, “From the Embers of the Old: Why the DSA Surged and How it Can Grow,” gives a sense of the convention and the organization as a whole. Hosted by *Jacobin* magazine Editor Bhaskar Sunkara, it featured Duhalde; DSA National Director Maria Svart; Bill Fletcher, Jr., a longtime Stalinist and supporter of Barack Obama who recently joined the DSA; and Beth Huang, a DSA member in Boston.

While supposedly about the history of the DSA, almost nothing was said on this topic. At one point, Sunkara declared that he “didn’t want to stick too much in the past, because as they said in *The Sopranos*, ‘Remember when is the lowest form of conversation.’” Any actual examination of the DSA’s history would have to address the failure of its entire perspective of reforming the Democratic Party—from Michael Harrington’s close relations with the Johnson administration through the DSA’s promotion of Bernie Sanders, who is currently chair of the Senate Budget Committee and one of the chief promoters of Biden.

Politically, Sunkara aligned himself most closely with Fletcher. This conforms to the pro-Stalinist politics of *Jacobin*, which has taken recently to promoting the Communist Party USA and glorifying the role of the Stalinist executioners in Spain. In the months leading up to the convention, a number of leading members of the

DSA posted tweets celebrating the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky by an agent of the Stalinist GPU.

The session, as with so many others, was dominated by discussion over various political realignments, devoid of any principled political foundation. There is a conflict within the DSA over whether and how they orient to various other “left” groups, including Stalinists and Maoists, as well as Socialist Alternative, which recently had several of its leading members join the organization. At one point, Fletcher said that the DSA had to appreciate the centrality of the “United Front” and cultivate its relations with others on the “left,” or “otherwise you are building a big cult.”

This conflict is purely tactical, however, as all the groups in and around the DSA share its basic political orientation: support for the Democratic Party. Svart, the organizational leader of the DSA, had nothing to say in response to Fletcher’s warning that the DSA would become a “big cult,” suggesting only that she agreed with many of his points.

The DSA also voted to integrate itself more closely with nominally “left” capitalist governments in Latin America. A resolution from the “International Committee” of the DSA was passed to formally affiliate the DSA with the São Paulo Forum, an organization set up by the Brazilian Workers’ Party, which under Lula Da Silva and then Dilma Rousseff governed Brazil and implemented austerity measures from 2003 to 2016.

The São Paulo Forum includes parties that are presently in power in 10 countries in Latin America, including Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela.

While there are young people and workers who may temporarily find themselves in the DSA due to a mistaken belief that it is a socialist organization, the DSA itself is controlled by upper-middle-class functionaries, a sort of lumpen affluentsia, who neither want to nor are capable of speaking to the working class. The more extreme the crisis, the more the DSA turns to the state and the ruling class, and the more it is exposed as an organization without a serious past, without a perspective for the present and without a political future.



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