

A modest proposal by Jacobin editor Bhaskar Sunkara to help Democrats restore faith in two-party system

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12 January 2022

On the one-year anniversary of Trump's putsch attempt of January 6, *Jacobin* editor and prominent Democratic Socialists of America member Bhaskar Sunkara published an opinion piece in the *Guardian* advising the Democratic Party as to how it can "defuse" political tensions in America and restore faith in the two-party system.

The article, headlined "When American democracy crumbles, it won't be televised," appears with the subhead, "Don't expect a dramatic fascist storming of the Capitol building or a military takeover when our crisis comes to a head."

Sunkara's method is an exposition of the DSA's political role, which is to dull social discontent and channel it behind the Democratic Party.

He begins by stressing the relative stability of the capitalist two-party system. To the extent there is a political crisis in America, it is "slow-moving," he writes. January 6 was not an expression of the crisis of the two-party system, but of its strength.

January 6 was "not a coup," Sunkara says. The protest was "disorganized" and dissipated after protesters "got bored." Democrats and the media blew it out of proportion in "wall-to-wall coverage" that only exacerbated tensions. "The strongest sign that the United States wasn't actually in danger of falling to fascism that day was the response to 6 January from American elites" who opposed Trump and defended the Constitution. The American ruling class, Sunkara writes, is "far from ready to openly abandon liberal democratic norms."

The reality is the exact opposite. January 6 showed the ruling class was entirely unwilling to take any action to defend "liberal democratic norms" when faced with an attempt to overthrow the Constitution and establish a dictatorship. The fecklessness Democrats displayed in response to the theft of the 2000 election played out on an even higher level. The Democrats are far more fearful of social opposition from below than they are of the anti-democratic plots of the far-right, even when the country comes to the precipice of dictatorship.

On January 6, the coup failed due to tactical shortfalls and accidents, not due to opposition from any section of the elite. Elements in the police fraternized with demonstrators and the military gave Trump 199 minutes and refused to send troops to rescue members of Congress trapped beneath the Capitol. Almost 150 Republican members of Congress voted against certifying the

election results and not a single Democrat made a popular appeal while the putsch was underway, either to the masses of working people in Washington D.C. or across the country, to rally in defense of democracy. The corporations Sunkara claims were opponents of dictatorship are now donating millions of dollars to the same Republicans involved in the plot.

Sunkara's efforts to downplay the significance of January 6 are entirely in line with the Democratic Party's response. Far from exaggerating the danger of January 6, the Democrats have taken no serious legal action against the chief conspirators. On January 8, Biden said "we need a strong Republican Party," while Democrats constantly refer to Republicans as their "colleagues."

After presenting January 6 as a sign of the stability of the political system, Sunkara says the true danger is not dictatorship, but political polarization and rising tensions. The "American political system was uniquely ill-equipped to handle polarization," he writes. As a result, "It's no wonder so many Americans lack faith in the ability of politics to change their lives."

With this bait-and-switch, Sunkara concludes that the left should not demand that Biden enact left-wing policies on the grounds that this will fuel the growth of the far-right.

If Trumpism was the counter-revolution inaugurated by eight years of tepid liberalism under President Obama, what kind of response would a more confident leftwing government inaugurate? That's a question that every progressive should ask themselves, especially as they attempt to push Biden to become "the new FDR." After all, we can expect reactionary forces to become even more aggressive if faced with a more assertive leftwing foe.

How does one defuse the situation? To begin with, Democrats need to focus less on conjuring nightmares about the future (even if some of those fears are warranted) and more on offering dreams that people can believe in. That means clearer bread-and-butter messaging about the material gains that politics can offer people. They should lead with this program, while being willing to take measures to pursue institutional reform to carry out this program once in power, such as eliminating the Senate filibuster and weakening the power of the courts.

It is the job of Democratic Party operatives like Bhaskar Sunkara to advise capitalist parties how they might “defuse the situation” or devise new election slogans (though he could be more original than plagiarizing Obama’s “change we can believe in” with “dreams that people can believe in”).

Socialists do not hope to offer solutions to the Democratic Party’s “messaging” problems. We do not seek to “defuse” social tensions, because tensions in society are ultimately a product of the division of capitalist society into classes with irreconcilable interests. Socialists fight to educate and mobilize the working class so that it can establish a socialist society where classes cease to exist and where production is organized democratically to meet human needs.

But the crux of Sunkara’s argument reveals the anti-socialist character of the DSA. He argues that the left would objectively aid the fascist right if it “attempted to push Biden to become ‘the new FDR.’”

First of all, it is the Democrats, not their left critics, who are responsible for aiding Trump by downplaying January 6. And what Sunkara says *helps* the fascists is actually the only force capable of *crushing* them: the social power of the working class mobilized independent of the Democratic Party.

Sunkara is denouncing opposition to an administration that is sacrificing the lives of countless workers to Wall Street in the course of the pandemic. The Biden administration is now carrying out a version of the Trump administration’s “let it rip” policy of herd immunity, which will soon kill their 900,000th person in the United States. Biden is forcing workers and students to return to work and school as the Omicron variant ravages the entire world in order to fuel corporate profits and enrich the financial aristocracy that derives its wealth from Wall Street speculation. The Democratic administration and Democratic Congress were unable to even pass a modest social infrastructure bill but managed to pass the largest Pentagon spending bill in US history.

These are the policies that Sunkara says cannot be opposed, lest we anger the far-right, whose COVID policy wish list is meanwhile being fulfilled by Biden himself. In actual fact, it is Sunkara who, by presenting January 6 as an exaggeration that merits little attention, provides the right with political cover for its ongoing conspiracies.

Sunkara’s argument is drawn from the political playbook of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the privileged caste of bureaucrats which attempted to maintain its rotten alliances with sections of the bourgeoisie and suppress the working class by slandering left-wing opposition as “fascist” or “left in form, right in content.”

The argument was used to physically exterminate the socialist, Trotskyist opposition to the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy. It was a central element of the frame-up of the Moscow Trials and the political genocide that was the Great Terror. In the GPU dungeons of the Spanish Civil War, countless socialist workers and left-wing opponents of the Popular Front were tortured and killed on the made-up grounds that they formed a “Fifth Column” in alliance with fascism. On this basis the Stalinists poisoned the political climate and prepared for the August 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico City. It is significant that a substantial section of the DSA leadership

celebrated Stalin’s assassination of Trotsky last year.

But Sunkara’s argument is even baser today than it was in the period of the Popular Front, where the sections of the bourgeoisie with which Stalinism was in alliance at least recognized that saving capitalism required enacting social reforms. In his article, Sunkara says Biden must not be pressured into becoming an FDR! He argues that workers and young people must remain passive and uncritically support a capitalist party that has not enacted a single serious social reform in 50 years.

Sunkara’s appeal is part of a longstanding effort by the DSA to defend the Democratic establishment from left-wing criticism, a role the DSA has played since its foundation as a faction of the Democratic Party. In March, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez denounced opponents of Biden as “bad faith” actors and claimed criticism of the administration was an exercise in “privilege” and that socialists should “de-prioritize human rights.” Sunkara’s argument is slightly different, but the end goal—disarm left-wing opposition to Biden—is the same. The purpose of the DSA is not to popularize socialism, but to block its development as an opposition to the Democratic Party.

But Sunkara’s effort to silence criticism of Biden also undermines the DSA’s justification for its relationship with the Democratic Party. When confronted with criticism from the left, the DSA argues there is a path to socialism through its “inside-outside strategy.” The DSA works “inside” the Democratic Party only in order to use “outside” pressure to push the Democrats to the left. But Sunkara now blames “outside” pressure for fanning the far-right and instead demands uncritical adherence to the “inside” leadership of the Biden administration.

Socialists and young people interested in joining an organization that is the opposite of what Sunkara and the DSA envision should join the SEP and IYSSE.



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