

Democratic Socialists of America confront left-wing opposition to Biden by shifting further to the right

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The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is preparing to move further to the right as the Biden administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress unabashedly prosecute the interests of Wall Street and American imperialism and reject even the paltriest proposals for social reform.

The DSA has long presented a mythical version of the Democratic Party, suggesting that it would open up avenues for social reform once in power.

Since the inauguration of Joe Biden, the DSA has presented the Democratic administration—backed by a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress—as a driving force of progressive social change.

In its first quarterly statement published after the November 2020 election and Biden’s inauguration in January 2021, the DSA’s *Socialist Forum* editorial committee wrote: “It seems like Democrats have learned some important lessons from the Obama administration. What’s more, there is now, for the first time in many years, a meaningful Left in this country that will continue to push for the biggest and boldest policies possible to combat the pandemic, social inequality, racial injustice, and climate change.”

The DSA’s promise of a “meaningful Left” through the Democratic Party has proven to be a disaster for the working class. Biden has brought the world closer to the prospect of nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Half a million more Americans have died of COVID in the year since Biden took office, and now the Biden administration and Democratic governors are ending all restrictions on the pandemic as more than 2,000 people die every day.

This reality explodes the DSA’s claims that its influence has encouraged the 200-year-old party of imperialist reaction to transform itself into a left-wing party of social progress.

In a series of recent statements, the Democratic operatives who lead the DSA have begun to acknowledge the growth of left-wing opposition to DSA-backed politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman, who are increasingly seen as conventional capitalist politicians and apologists for Biden and Pelosi. Aware that this opposition reflects broader working-class discontent, the DSA concludes that it must work even harder to present a mythical version of the Democratic Party in order to better channel social discontent behind it.

To bridge the growing chasm between the DSA myth and the Democratic reality, the DSA leadership is maneuvering to the right, calling for an end to any political principle that might “marginalize” the DSA from the Democratic Party establishment. Prominent DSA figures are praising even conservative Democrats like Chuck Schumer and New York Governor Kathy Hochul. DSA-linked politicians are abandoning slogans that were associated with the mass demonstrations against the Trump administration, including “Abolish ICE” and “defund the police.”

Concern over the influence of “left-wing critics”

There is a growing recognition by the DSA leadership that its defense of the Democratic Party is so detached from reality that it is provoking serious opposition from the left.

A February 14 *Jacobin* article by Natalie Shure, “The End of the AOC Honeymoon,” notes that the enthusiasm of the Sanders presidential campaign of 2020 has largely dissolved and given way to frustration with the Democratic Party’s “progressive” elements. “Two years later, the outlook for this new left is still not clear,” Shure writes. “Thanks to the limits of the human life span, there won’t be a Bernie 2024. And large parts of the post-Bernie vacuum are losing faith in his young successors, thirty-two-year-old Ocasio-Cortez and the progressive members of Congress surrounding her.”

These concerns over “large parts of the post-Bernie vacuum losing faith” in the DSA’s political leaders are at the heart of the DSA’s *raison d’être*. The DSA exists to trap social opposition and to channel it back into the Democratic Party.

Shure references growing opposition to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who “left-wing critics” say “had been tamed and co-opted by the Democratic Party.” Shure also refers to left-wing “dissent about the Squad’s political project” when DSA member and New York Congressman Jamaal Bowman “sparked ire for voting to fund Israel’s Iron Dome.”

Shure admits that “the hundred-plus DSA members serving in state and local office across the country, and even the socialists with significant blocs on city councils in urban centers like Chicago and New York, sometimes take positions that are wildly at odds with those of their organization.”

But Shure defends Ocasio-Cortez and Bowman and argues there is no principle worth defending if it alienates the Democratic Party establishment. Imperfect progressives make “insurgent progressive politics more popular within the Democratic Party,” Shure writes, and attacks left-wing critics: “This angry fallout and the media spectacle that accompanies it risks turning progressives like Bowman away from the DSA” and prevents the DSA from “working in coalition with more and more groups.” This is an appeal for a reconciliation with a broader, more explicitly right-wing segment of the Democratic Party.

Referencing Bowman’s Iron Dome vote, Shure cites DSA Vice President and former DNC official David Duhalde as advocating for “the need for flexibility when it comes to public officeholders.” Shure quotes Duhalde as saying, “For people like me, this is about winning, about building power with those elected to advance public policy and coalition work, and to raise the profile of DSA, not to act as a tribune for the organization.” In other words, the DSA must abandon all positions that

threaten to disrupt its “coalition work” with the Democratic Party establishment.

Jacobin’s New York Example

In a January 11 article by Liza Featherstone titled “New York Democratic Socialists are Playing the Long Game,” *Jacobin* acknowledged left-wing frustration over the inability of DSA members of Congress to accomplish anything, but the author argued that prospects for pressuring the Democrats are much better on the state and local level. According to Featherstone, the New York Democratic Party state machine is leading the march to socialism:

Democrats in Albany work with the socialists on issues of common ground, cosponsoring bills and even joining protests together. Both New York senators, Kirsten Gillibrand and Chuck Schumer, who are centrist Democrats, endorsed [DSA-backed Buffalo Mayoral candidate] India Walton after she won her primary. Schumer has embraced some of the socialists’ top priorities, even showing up for the taxi workers’ protest. [New York State Senator Julia] Salazar explains, “Senator Schumer is a shrewd politician who has his ear to the ground, and sees that politics are changing and that communities are electing democratic socialists because these are the policies they support.”

Featherstone praises right-wing Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul as being “somewhat responsive to socialist demands.” Featherstone then claims the DSA has given a substantial section of the Democratic Party the strength to proclaim that they are longtime socialists: “Others are progressive politicians who might not have admitted their socialist sympathies and now feel emboldened to do so more openly.”

In reality, “Comrade Hochul” is an unelected arch-reactionary who took over control of the state after former governor Andrew Cuomo was ousted in a sex scandal and is the party establishment’s pick for the 2022 gubernatorial election. Hochul has recently ended the state’s mask requirements, implemented a ban on homeless people resting in subways during cold winter months, declared that “no one in my administration supports defunding the police,” won the enthusiastic endorsement of Hillary Clinton, and has raised \$21 million in campaign funding, largely from Wall Street, real estate speculators, hospitals and nursing homes, hotel chains and gambling companies.

Notably, *Jacobin’s* article praises Hochul’s support for increasing police budgets, with Featherstone writing, “There is no one ‘working-class’ view on policing, but so far, the ‘defund the police’ message could complicate NYC-DSA’s efforts to build a mass electoral base,” calling it a “risky message” that “can seem out of touch with well-founded fears of crime.” Such statements make clear the DSA is not pressuring the Democrats to move to the left, but that the DSA is voluntarily moving further to the right to accommodate the Democratic establishment.

Additional evidence of this is seen in the open repudiation of protest slogans by DSA-linked candidates like New York Assemblywoman Alessandra Biaggi, who helped instigate the sex scandal that unseated Cuomo and is now running for Congress.

A February 17 *Washington Post* article titled “Democrats are fighting against far-left proposals they once accommodated” notes that Democrats across the country are abandoning past statements of support for protest slogans. The *Post* quotes Biaggi as apologizing for once sharing a tweet

that used #DefundThePolice: “Unfortunately, the phrase doesn’t fully capture that, and it’s been so politicized and so many people believe that it is solely about cutting funds to police departments.” In 2020, Biaggi’s assembly campaign was endorsed by the Bernie Sanders-founded Our Revolution group, with Biaggi saying at the time, “A lot of what we’re fighting for is in alignment with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).”

Similarly, Wisconsin Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes has apologized for a photo that shows him promoting a DSA t-shirt with the slogan “Abolish ICE.” Barnes is now running for Senate. He recently told the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*: “I am not a part of the Abolish ICE movement because no one slogan can capture all the work we have to do.” Such is the response of the Democrats to DSA efforts to “pressure” them from the left.

Praise for the Congressional Progressive Caucus

Another important shift was identifiable in a recent quarterly statement by the editorial board of DSA-aligned *Socialist Forum*, which offered praise for the Congressional Progressive Caucus usually only reserved for DSA’s own members of Congress. “It would be a mistake to write all of this off as business as usual,” *Socialist Forum* writes of the congressional Democrats’ actions since the 2020 election.

“For months, the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC) thwarted various attempts by Democratic centrists to sink the [social spending] deal. This reflects the positive changes in the CPC led by Rep. Pramila Jayapal, Rep. Ilhan Omar, and others to turn it into a more cohesive and programmatic bloc. It reflects the growing influence the broad Left has been able to exercise since Bernie Sanders first ran for president in 2016.”

In reality, the Progressive Caucus caved to Pelosi and voted to support Biden’s infrastructure bill without social spending, but the shift in language is significant. In a 2018 *Jacobin* article headlined, “We need a Socialist Caucus in Congress,” prominent DSA figure and *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara called for Ocasio-Cortez and future DSA members in Congress *not* to join the Democrats’ Progressive Caucus and to instead form a “socialist caucus.”

Moreover, *Socialist Forum’s* benediction of the work of the Progressive Caucus lends political support to figures like Hakeem Jeffries, a Progressive Caucus member (and leading member of the New York state Democratic machine) only undermines their own position. Jeffries recently formed a political action committee called Team Blue backed by corporate money for the explicit purpose of crushing left-wing primary challenges to right-wing Democrats.

“The Left in Purgatory”

Jacobin editor Sunkara vaguely outlined the situation confronting the DSA in a February 15 *Jacobin* statement titled “The Left in Purgatory,” announcing the latest print edition of the magazine which features the same title.

In the statement, Sunkara writes, “Socialists in the United States are stuck. How do we become masters of our own fate?”

Sunkara’s statement acknowledges growing disillusionment in figures he and *Jacobin* have consistently promoted. “There is no doubt that we’re at the end of a period of rapid politicization and settling into one of either gradual decline or slow advance,” he writes, adding, “The considerable

talents of even national figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez seem to be directed less toward confrontation with political and economic elites and more toward the terrain of cultural battles of late, destined to resonate most in ‘deep-blue’ districts.”

Sunkara expresses his concern that the DSA has been unable to build support for its pro-Democratic Party politics in the working class:

We might feel more confident about the prospects for the Left if, rather than a momentary shift leftward in liberal economic priorities or the rhetoric of certain parts of the mainstream media, there had been deeper inroads made among workers. There have been rare exceptions, but on the whole, it would be delusional to say that our ideological left has made a decade of progress merging with a wider social base.

He writes that “one year of marginality drifts into another” and concludes: “The question we may have to ask ourselves in the years to come is whether some of our actions could be hastening rather than reversing the process of class dealignment.”

Warnings of “marginalization” are simply justifications for opposition to any policy that would challenge the interests of the financial aristocracy which the Democratic Party represents. To these layers, who have no connection whatsoever to the class struggle, seeking a “wider social base” does not mean a turn to the social interests of the working class but, on the contrary, to the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracies.

Sunkara’s off-handed acknowledgement that the DSA is a barrier on the development of the struggle for socialism is perhaps the first honest statement he has ever made. The DSA is a faction of the Democratic Party that exists to protect the two-party system and stop the development of an independent socialist movement in the working class. Like its parent organization, it responds to pressure from below by moving to the right.



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