

Democratic Socialists of America in crisis as it covers for Biden administration's war drive against Russia

Genevieve Leigh
23 March 2022

The Democratic Socialists of America is embroiled in a deep internal crisis as it works to provide political cover for the Democratic Party and Biden administration as they drive headlong into war.

Perhaps the starker indication of the level of crisis within the organization is its near total silence on the escalating campaign of the US and NATO powers to wage war against Russia. The world stands closer to nuclear war than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the entirety of the DSA commentary on the matter would hardly fill two pages. *Democratic Left*, the official magazine of the DSA, has not posted a single article on the war, let alone an analysis of its origins or an elaboration of the policy and perspective of the DSA.

DSA National Director Maria Svart, in her March 18 “Director’s Report” to the membership, did not mention the war crisis at all. A single statement was issued by the DSA National Political Committee (NPC), in late February, “On Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” coming in at a whopping 266 words. Its main and only political point was to “reaffirm” the call for the US to withdraw from NATO.

However, even this timid statement provoked a swift and coordinated attack from a whole host of Democratic Party politicians on social media. Not a single one of the so-called “left” Democratic Party politicians endorsed by the DSA, and in some cases even official members of the organization, defended the DSA’s statement, as mild and toothless as it was. Instead, they rushed to distance themselves from any hint of criticism of US foreign policy.

The DSA leadership is now working overtime to “correct” its position and make clear its willingness to toe the Democratic Party line.

Early this week, the NPC “dechartered” the organization’s BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) and Palestine Solidarity working group. The decision was made without any formal discussion or debate within the membership.

An official letter explaining the action from the NPC notes

that all future DSA Palestine work will now be undertaken by the DSA’s International Committee (DSA-IC), the leadership of which is hand-selected by the NPC.

The BDS working group was chartered and formalized by delegates in attendance at two consecutive DSA national conventions. At the 2019 convention, DSA members explicitly voted to give the working group “autonomous leadership.”

“Dechartering” is the most serious disciplinary action that the NPC can take against any working group. Not only does it disband the group, it also means that members of its steering committee are ineligible to hold DSA national leadership positions for one year. Since the action was taken, the DSA BDS working group web page has been suspended and its social media accounts silenced.

The public catalyst for the conflict between the BDS working group and the NPC emerged over the actions of DSA member and Democratic Party Congressman Jamaal Bowman.

In late September, Bowman voted to provide the Israeli military with \$1.1 billion for its Iron Dome armament program in addition to the \$3.3 billion in Israeli military funding for which Bowman previously voted in July. Less than two weeks after his Iron Dome vote, Bowman traveled to Israel as part of a Democratic Party delegation and met with far-right Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett.

Bowman’s open solidarization with Israeli war crimes provoked criticism from a section of DSA members, who began circulating a petition calling for his expulsion from the DSA.

After a drawn-out process of private “discussions” with Bowman, the NPC declared that he would not be removed. Dozens of chapters voted to dissent from the NPC’s decision over the following months. The BDS working group issued a statement condemning the NPC for failing to expel Bowman.

While the immediate issue behind the action against the

BDS working group is the controversy over Bowman, there is no doubt that the war drive against Russia is a central issue in discussions within the DSA leadership. Bowman was one of the elected DSA members to issue a public statement, in which he declared that he “support[s] NATO and will continue to do so during this crisis,” an open rebuff to the DSA’s statement. Bowman went on to add that he fully backs the actions of the Biden administration, which is funneling weapons into Ukraine and amassing troops in Eastern Europe.

The congressman also issued a statement on March 9 after voting “no” on the \$782 billion military budget. He hastened to explain that he would have voted “yes” on military aid to Ukraine and funding for the Iron Dome, if they had been separate provisions.

The NPC letter to its membership explaining the reasons for “dechartering” the BDS group is a mealy-mouthed attempt to cover over all the real political issues. It states that the behaviors of the working group “pose a serious threat to the reputation and trustworthiness of DSA, and can make it difficult for the organization and chapters to work with partners and enact political strategy.”

By “a serious threat to the reputation and trustworthiness of the DSA,” the DSA means the trust of the Democratic Party, in particular, and the ruling class in general. It wants to remove any suggestion that the DSA is not fully behind the “political strategy” of war being implemented by its “partners” in the Democratic Party leadership.

As for its own “political strategy,” this is premised on the lie that the Democratic Party will be pushed to the left by electing individuals like Bowman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others. When these individuals do what they inevitably will, backing the agenda of the ruling class, the DSA capitulates all down the line.

“Political strategy” requires that one not scare away the politicians of the ruling class over any silly principled matters, such as opposition to world war. As for any internal groups that do not toe the line, the DSA follows the maxim, “If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off...”

The reality is that the DSA is not seeking to “pressure” the Democratic Party to do anything. Rather, it is seeking to prevent a break with the Democratic Party and the building of a real, independent, mass socialist movement of the working class. In exchange for services rendered, the DSA leadership, comprised of and speaking for privileged sections of the upper-middle class, is looking for “a seat at the table,” i.e., positions and, most importantly, financial resources.

This has always been at the heart of the DSA’s “strategy” since its inception in 1982. The organization was born from a merger between the New American Movement (NAM), a

successor organization of the student protest group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee (DSOC), founded by Michael Harrington.

Harrington served as the chairperson of the DSA from its inception until his death in 1989. His politics were shaped by his mentor, Max Shachtman, who broke with the Trotskyist movement in 1939-40. Over the next several decades Shachtman drifted far to the right, eventually openly advocating support for American imperialism in the Vietnam War.

Harrington became a supporter and student of Shachtman during the latter’s rightward drift. During this time, he pressed the SDS to take a more explicitly anti-Communist position against the Soviet Union, always looking for an orientation which primarily served the foreign policy interests of US imperialism. Harrington would later demand that socialist organizations play “a pro-American, Cold War, State Department kind of role.”

The self-stated goal of the DSA since its inception has always been to pressure the Democratic Party to the left “from within.” Forty years later, what can it show for its efforts? The Democratic Party has spent decades destroying social services and suppressing working class struggles, and is now spearheading the drive to World War III.

As the political crisis intensifies, the DSA will do everything in its power to perform its given task: undermine the leftward movement of the masses, and, in particular, any opposition to war, and funnel workers back into the Democratic Party.

However, workers and young people have been through enormous experiences, under both Democrats and Republicans: countless US-led military interventions, ruthless attacks on immigrants, the massive growth of social inequality and, most profoundly, the criminal response of the ruling class to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has now left one million people dead in the US.

The evident crisis within the DSA is ultimately produced by the fact that, under these conditions, its pretense to being anything other than a pro-imperialist adjunct of the Democratic Party is becoming increasingly impossible to maintain.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact