

Ocasio-Cortez, Sanders and the DSA vote for war

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In the history of the socialist movement, parties and political figures are defined above all by their attitude to imperialist war.

On June 16, 1918, Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs was arrested and jailed for a speech opposing the US government's involvement in World War I. Speaking to a large crowd in a park in Canton, Ohio, Debs called the war an imperialist war and denounced the Democratic administration of Woodrow Wilson and the capitalist governments of Europe for waging it.

“Every solitary one of these aristocratic conspirators and would-be murderers claims to be an arch-patriot,” Debs declared. “Every one of them insists that the war is being waged to make the world safe for democracy. What humbug! What rot! What false pretense!”

On May 10, every single Democratic Socialist of America (DSA)-backed member of Congress voted to approve Joe Biden's request for \$40 billion in military and financial aid for Ukraine.

Bernie Sanders, who once published a recording of himself reading Debs' Canton speech, voted “yes” for war credits and said, “We should always have a debate, but the problem is that Ukraine is in the middle of a very intense war right now. I think every day counts, and I think we have to respond as strongly and vigorously as we can.”

Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, who knows nothing about the history of socialism, voted “yes” too. Hoping that people either would not notice or would quickly forget her vote, she refused to issue as much as a press release or tweet explaining her vote. The other DSA members of congress, Rashida Tlaib, Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman, all voted “yes” as well.

The vote marks a crossing of a political Rubicon. It is an endorsement of the US/NATO war against Russia. It takes money out of the hands of working people confronting inflation and poverty at home and directs it toward death and destruction abroad. It dramatically increases the possibility of a world war between nuclear powers.

Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders have risen to national prominence by promoting themselves as representatives of the “anti-war” and “left-wing” sentiments of masses of people. The DSA similarly calls itself the “largest socialist organization in America.” But their pro-imperialist actions speak louder than words. They are nothing more than petty-bourgeois lackeys of the most ruthless imperialist power in the world.

According to a House Appropriations Committee summary of

the legislation, Ocasio-Cortez, Sanders and the DSA have cast their votes for the following:

- \$6 billion to pay the salaries of the Ukrainian military, including its fascist Azov Battalion.
- \$9.05 billion to replenish US weapons deployed to Ukrainian military.
- \$3.9 billion for “mission support and intelligence” support and to deploy additional US military equipment to Eastern Europe, including a Patriot missile system.
- \$600 million “for faster missile production” in the US.
- \$500 million “to procure critical munitions to increase the stocks of the Department of Defense.”
- \$4 billion to “build and update” the military capacities of NATO powers in Eastern Europe.
- \$200 million to update the US Embassy in Kiev.
- \$400 million to fund the Ukrainian police.

Ocasio-Cortez's campaign website states she aims “to put everyday New Yorkers first,” but her vote takes billions of dollars out of the hands of the working class and into building missiles and paying the salaries of Ukrainian fascists who worship the perpetrators of the Holocaust. One cannot fight fascism at home while arming them abroad, nor can one fight “corporate power” in the US while doing Wall Street's bidding on a global scale.

In 2021, the leadership of the DSA attacked the *World Socialist Web Site* for exposing Ocasio-Cortez's denunciation of socialist opposition to Biden as “bad faith” and “privileged,” in an article that was read over 100,000 times. The DSA leadership declared that the WSWS was slandering Ocasio-Cortez and manipulating her words, with prominent Democratic political operatives declaring that the WSWS was itself acting in “bad faith.”

Now, Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders have cast a vote to arm American imperialism and its puppet regime in Ukraine as it prosecutes a war that threatens the extinction of humanity. This is an extension of a role Sanders has played since he first entered Congress in 1991.

As it did with DSA member Jamaal Bowman's vote to fund the Israeli military, the DSA may attempt to distance itself from Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders' votes in order to shore up its flagging image as a “left” organization. But support for imperialism is a central feature of the DSA's political character. The DSA was founded by Michael Harrington, who wrote that socialists must play “a pro-American, Cold War, State Department kind of role.” Harrington's political mentor, Max Shachtman, supported the

Korean and Vietnam wars, as well as the Bay of Pigs invasion.

In recent weeks, the DSA has been preparing its justification for supporting imperialist war in the pages of *Socialist Forum*, one of its official publications.

In an article entitled “Breaking Camp: The US Left and Foreign Policy after the War in Ukraine,” Georgetown University Professor Greg Afinogenov argues that “the left” must abandon its opposition to American imperialism in order to confront Russia and China.

Economic sanctions, Afinogenov writes, “will not be enough to compel a retreat, let alone to overthrow Putin, and Ukrainian leaders themselves have lost hope in NATO protection.” The article makes no mention of the fact that US sanctions are throwing hundreds of millions of workers to the brink of starvation across the world.

The purpose of Afinogenov’s article is to call for support for US imperialism and its war aims.

“The most controversial feature of contemporary anti-imperialism,” the article states, “is its tendency to boil down to the simple procedure of determining which side the US is on in any given conflict and automatically taking the opposite position.” Afinogenov writes that “socialists should be wary” of those who base their outlook on a “recognition of the need for rational limits on the use of US power abroad.” He concludes, as a result, that “contemporary anti-imperialism is not a coherent political strategy.”

If the US’s position as world policeman is undermined, Afinogenov writes, it would “give a freer hand to other actors pursuing their own economic or imperial goals, including China and Russia.” Russia, he claims, is “much more aggressive” than US imperialism, and is therefore the main enemy.

Only a pro-war publication operated by a pro-war organization could print such a statement. For the last 30 years, the United States has destroyed entire societies, killing millions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, Syria and many other countries. Socialists lend no support to the right-wing Putin regime for its invasion of Ukraine, but to claim that Russia is “more aggressive” than American imperialism is nothing more than war propaganda in the service of the US government, aimed at paving the way for its next crimes.

In the same edition of *Socialist Forum*, another article, entitled “Toward a modern theory of internationalism,” by Bjorn Pederson, calls for arming the Ukrainians:

Mutual aid and even sanctions have their place in our response, but they simply are not equal to quickly stopping the Russian war machine. Opposition to military aid is less persuasive when that aid is given at the request of the democratically elected government of a country being invaded, as has happened in Ukraine.

Pederson demands that “the left” cease criticizing American imperialism for its role stoking the conflict: “It doesn’t serve the Left well to spend this moment railing against the limited slate of

bad options that have been forced on us by decades of failed international policy.”

The proponents of imperialist war promote the fiction that a victory for American imperialism will serve humanitarian ends. In a May 10 forum hosted by the former publishing house of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization, Haymarket Books attempted to put an identity-politics spin on support for arming Ukrainian fascists. During the event, Yulya Yurchenko, a fellow at the George Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center (and self-described “feminist activist”), declared:

We must channel theory into praxis. We need to do what is necessary to help the victims of aggression to protect themselves by any means necessary. ... that means arming Ukraine and overcoming personal moral conflicts about violence. This is not about us staying pious but about helping those subject to violence, and they need to protect themselves. So, standing by and [calling for] non-interference in such situations are tantamount to condoning the continuation of violence. ... The moral choice here is clear. I am also against war. I hate violence in any form. Yet when somebody comes to you with a gun, you waving a flower in their face is not going to solve the problem.

Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA are sending weapons to the Ukrainian military not out of theoretical confusion, but because it serves the interests of the privileged social force which they represent.

The pseudo-left represents the top 10 percent of society, a privileged section of the population whose stock portfolios depend upon the ability of American banks and corporations to dominate the world and subjugate their rivals. This layer is now hysterically pro-war and rabid in its denunciations of the Russian people and Russian culture.

The role of the DSA is to provide a “left” propaganda spin on American imperialism’s ruthless war aims. To paraphrase Debs, while there is a political establishment, they are in it. While there is imperialism, they will support it. They represent everything socialism is *not*.



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