

# The significance of the Democratic Socialists of America's call for US war against Russia until "Ukrainian victory"

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The decision by the entire congressional slate of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) members and DSA-backed representatives to rescind a letter to Joe Biden calling for peace talks with Russia increases the likelihood of direct conflict between the US and Russia and raises the risk of nuclear war.

The DSA's endorsement of US imperialism's war against Russia in Ukraine is not a break with the DSA's history. On the contrary, it is the latest (and most dangerous) iteration of the organization's pro-imperialist political essence.

Less than 24 hours after 30 of its members published the letter to Biden last Monday, the House Progressive Caucus issued a statement not only rescinding the letter, but calling for prosecuting the war "until Ukrainian victory." A week has passed since the letter signed by DSA members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Cori Bush (D-MO) and Jamaal Bowman (D-NY) was withdrawn, and none has made any statement about the cowardly reversal or even tweeted on the subject.

On October 25, the WSWS contacted Ocasio-Cortez's press office and asked, "Does Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez oppose the decision by the leadership of the Progressive Caucus to withdraw the letter calling for a negotiated settlement to the war in Ukraine? If so, we'd like to give her the chance to say so on the record." The congresswoman's office acknowledged receipt of the question but did not give an answer.

DSA-endorsed Ilhan Omar has spoken publicly about the 24-hour reversal, claiming she withdrew her signature from the original letter because of "timing" and because "the letter was a response to intel we were getting" in late June, evidently from the Pentagon and CIA, about the danger of escalation. This explanation is disingenuous, since the danger of nuclear war has only increased, with Biden declaring earlier in October that the world is on the verge of "Armageddon." In reality, the DSA slate withdrew their signatures because Nancy Pelosi told them to on behalf of Wall Street and the military.

Significantly, Omar responded to questions about her reversal by attacking opponents of war. In a series of tweets, she said those who claim the DSA members are "war mongers" for rescinding their signatures are merely promoters of Russian "internet disinformation."

Omar re-tweeted a thread by a *Huffington Post* reporter denouncing "the fringe [for] attempting to suggest... that progressives who support Ukraine—the vast majority, from Bernie to Ilhan & AOC—are warmongers." She also pledged to vote for additional military spending for the war, even as the Biden administration does next to nothing to provide support to tens of millions of Americans confronting rising inflation, poverty and the ongoing spread of COVID-19 in their schools and workplaces.

Bernie Sanders, (I-VT), another DSA-backed candidate, was asked about the initial letter calling for negotiations: "I don't agree with that,

and they don't agree with it apparently," he said, perhaps not intending the insult.

The call for war until "Ukrainian victory" is indistinguishable from the position of the most extreme elements of the military-intelligence apparatus of which the DSA is a part. In fact, their silence places them to the right of figures like Ro Khanna (D-CA), a member of the Progressive Caucus who represents Silicon Valley, who defended the letter and called for negotiations.

The only semi-official attempt at damage control by a DSA leadership body on the 24-hour reversal was issued by the DSA's International Committee via its Twitter account on October 28.

"It's disappointing the letter was withdrawn under pressure," the DSA-IC wrote. "We must continue organizing and speak out against dangerous mainstream rhetoric further fueling war and inching the world closer to nuclear catastrophe. Forgoing calls for diplomacy only emboldens warmongers to the detriment of crucially needed discourse."

Commenters who noted that the DSA's actions were a part of the "dangerous mainstream rhetoric further fueling war" were promptly blocked.

The DSA-IC tweet linked to an October 27 article in *Jacobin* by Branko Marcetic titled, "With progressive members pulling their Ukraine letter, diplomacy is now a four-letter word." The article correctly states that the decision to withdraw the letter was "dangerous at any time, let alone when nuclear tensions are high," but does not even mention that four of the representatives who rescinded their signatures were members of the DSA.

The 24-hour reversal is not a break from the DSA's track record. It is part and parcel of their longstanding role as a pro-imperialist faction of the imperialist Democratic Party.

In March, the DSA members in Congress voted unanimously to provide \$40 billion in military aid to the Ukrainian government, including thousands of Stinger missiles, heavy artillery and equipment used by the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion in the war against Russia. The vote was a boon to the weapons manufacturers, which have seen their profits soar as a result of the war's prolongation. Lockheed Martin CFO Jay Malave said at the time that he was "pleased" at the passage of the military spending bill.

The DSA has also promoted a pro-war Ukrainian group called "Sotsialnyi Rukh" (Social Movement), an organization whose leadership is comprised of individuals who work with the National Endowment for Democracy and the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, both CIA-linked organizations with long histories of crushing working class resistance to American imperialism abroad. DSA members like Ashley Smith have repeatedly denounced left-wing opponents of the US/NATO-backed war, calling them "faux anti-imperialists" who wish to "betray Ukraine."

But the pro-war role of the DSA did not emerge only recently. The DSA

came out of a political tendency led by Max Shachtman, a leading member of the Communist Party youth movement in the 1920s who, alongside James P. Cannon, helped found the American section of the Left Opposition after supporters of Trotsky were expelled from the Communist Party in 1928.

However, Shachtman broke with the Trotskyist movement when the Second World War began in 1939-40, and he moved toward the adoption of pro-imperialist positions, breaking from his socialist past. In particular, Shachtman argued that the left must support “democratic” American imperialism in the Cold War against “authoritarian” Russia, which he claimed was no longer a workers’ state.

Shachtman presented US imperialism’s brutal wars of the mid-20th century as justified by the need for “democratic” America to counter “communist aggression.” His articles supporting the Korean War were dropped in pamphlet form by American military planes over the Korean peninsula as propaganda. He supported the Kennedy administration’s invasion of Cuba in the Bay of Pigs, and he became a loud advocate of the Vietnam War.

Shachtman’s protégé, Michael Harrington, who would later found the DSA’s predecessor organization, the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee, also presented US imperialism as a “democratic” counterweight to “authoritarian” Russia. He operated on the principle that the American left must play “a pro-American, Cold War, State Department kind of role,” according to historian Todd Gitlin.

At the time of the Vietnam War, Harrington belonged, as did Shachtman, to the Socialist Party. The SP, under the political influence of Shachtman, supported the US war and called for a defeat of the struggle of the Vietnamese people for independence from French and American imperialism.

For years, as American imperialism rained napalm and bombs on Vietnam, Harrington supported the SP majority line. He denounced the National Liberation Front as “communist” and “authoritarian” along the same lines as the Lyndon Johnson administration, which Harrington had served as a member of a domestic task force. In 1965, as the US was escalating the war, Harrington said, “I am anti-communist on principle because I am pro-freedom.”

However, as anti-war sentiment grew over the course of the 1960s, Harrington aimed to make the SP’s pro-war position more palatable. Harrington supporter Maurice Isserman writes in his biography *The Other American* that in the spring of 1967:

Michael [Harrington] helped Shachtman and others organize a new group called Negotiations Now, which promoted itself as a responsible, moderate alternative to the irresponsible, radical groups calling for the immediate withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam... But Negotiations Now’s chief function was to serve as the SP’s placeholder in the antiwar movement—something they could point to when challenged to show that they too were working to bring the war to an end. Negotiations Now also served as a convenient podium from which the Shachtmanites could criticize the rest of the antiwar movement as being, in contrast, extremist, misguided, and objectively pro-Communist.

In 1970, Harrington called for a removal of US troops from Vietnam and broke with his former mentor without repudiating Shachtman’s pro-imperialist politics.

What has remained constant throughout the pre-history of the DSA and its current role is the effort to suppress anti-war sentiment and facilitate the prosecution of the interests of US imperialism.

Harrington coined the opportunist phrase “the left-wing of the possible”

and claimed this meant that the left must fight to accomplish what was possible at the moment. What it actually meant is that the “left” cannot do anything that would “possibly” upset the Democratic Party. Harrington’s call for negotiations fifty-five years ago corresponded to the position of a significant section of the Democratic Party, which found reflection in the 1968 presidential campaigns of Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, both of which Harrington supported.

Today’s DSA rescinded the letter calling for negotiations because the Democratic Party cannot tolerate the expression of *any* anti-war sentiment within its apparatus. This is not a product of the strength of its political position, but of its weakness and its total alienation from the population, which by a wide majority wants the US to negotiate to avoid nuclear war.

This experience shows that the DSA has not moved to the left since the days of Harrington and the founding of DSOC in 1972 and the DSA in 1982. On the contrary, for decades the DSA has functioned as a faction of the Democratic Party, working within this imperialist organization as it has moved farther and farther to the right. Its attempts to pressure the Democratic Party to move to the left have only succeeded in providing political cover for its move to the right.

The DSA is not a vehicle for opposing imperialist war. It is a catchment area for the two-party system. Its role is to trap social opposition and chloroform it within the Democratic Party.

The craven and immediate capitulation of the DSA members also reflects the fact that the upper-middle-class social layer for whom the DSA speaks is a constituency for imperialist war. As the Socialist Equality Party (US) wrote in a resolution at its Seventh Congress:

The war has thoroughly exposed the pseudo-left organizations that represent privileged sections of the upper middle class, including the Democratic Socialists of America in the United States. Under the guise of opposing Russian “imperialism,” the DSA, along with various Pabloite and “state capitalist” organizations internationally, have aligned themselves with the US and NATO and called for the imperialist arming of Ukraine. Their support for the war against Russia is a culmination of a policy that they have pursued in relation to imperialist war against Libya, Syria, and other countries.

The SEP (US) resolution states: “The social basis for opposition to war is the international working class.” The fight against war is “not possible except through the political mobilization of the working class in opposition to the entire ruling class and its two parties, the Democrats and Republicans. The development of an anti-war movement in the US must be connected to the fight to unite workers in every country, including in Russia and Ukraine, against war and imperialism.” That is the perspective of socialists.



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