

Political crisis emerges within leadership of Democratic Socialists of America

Eric London
19 January 2023

Two years after the coming to power of the Democratic administration of President Joe Biden, a political crisis has erupted inside the leadership of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

The crisis is rooted in the organization's inability to mask its increasingly naked pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist essence. A long string of actions by the DSA is breaking down the illusions of thousands of DSA members who joined the organization believing it was an opponent of imperialist war and capitalism.

But these actions of the DSA are exposing the reality that the DSA is nothing but a faction of the Democratic Party. Among the most important are the DSA's elected officials' votes to arm the Israeli occupation of Palestine, provide US imperialism with tens of billions of dollars to escalate the war with nuclear-armed Russia, and legalize the potential strike by 100,000 railroad workers.

With the coming to power of Biden, the DSA has dropped the more confrontational veneer that it maintained while Trump was president. Its representatives in Congress have routinely promoted the false "progressive" bona fides of the Biden administration while denouncing left-wing criticism of his administration. It was in March 2021, shortly after Biden's inauguration, that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez attacked antiwar and anti-capitalist criticism of the Democratic establishment as "bad faith" and "privileged."

DSA leaders acknowledge this has produced growing disillusionment among the membership, with leaders at a recent public forum noting widespread "demoralization," "exhaustion" and a mood of "political uncertainty." A member of the DSA's National Political Committee (NPC) recently leaked information showing that 12,000 members have left the organization in the past year and that many chapters and youth groups have either disbanded or are no longer responding to calls from the leadership.

The crisis that has now broken into the open does not reflect a movement among a section of the DSA leadership toward a break with the Democratic Party. On the contrary, two main factions agree on maintaining the DSA's longstanding role of functioning within the Democratic Party and the party primary electoral system. Where the factions disagree is over the best method for preserving the DSA's role as a catchment area to trap left-wing opposition and contain it within the confines of the Democratic Party, a mechanism which they fear is breaking down.

One faction, led by DSA staff and older layers with long experience in the Democratic Party, argues that the organization must deepen its institutional alliance with the Democratic Party in order to provide the Democrats with the popular "left" face that they urgently need in order to dampen growing social opposition in the population, particularly over inflation and declining real wages. This faction is comprised of many DSA staff, including Vice Chair David Duhalde, himself a former Democratic National Committee official.

The other faction also calls for working within the Democratic Party and

the Democratic primary process, but worries that the DSA is so exposed by its right-wing role that it is losing its ability to direct young people and workers away from what one leading DSA member called "ultra-left" groups "outside DSA."

It is not accidental that the immediate trigger for the crisis breaking into full view was the attempt by the NPC majority to hire a Democratic Party hack as the DSA's "electoral director," though the causes of the crisis are more fundamental.

The original job posting for the position of electoral director was made available to the *World Socialist Web Site*. It emphasizes that the applicant must have substantial experience in the Democratic Party, setting as a requirement a "minimum of 5 years of managing field-heavy electoral campaigns and building durable and portable systems, with 1 to 2 years staff supervisory experience." While this is listed as a requirement, the fact that an applicant might "identify as a socialist" and be in "general agreement" with the DSA is only "preferred."

The aim of the electoral director position is to deepen the connection between the DSA and elected Democrats and orient the work of the membership to electing additional Democrats. The job posting calls for "building out our new Electoral department both through candidate and ballot campaigns," and notes that the applicant must be prepared to help overcome membership opposition to Democratic Party campaign work. One of the chief responsibilities of the position will be to "Work with chapters to help them message their electoral work internally and build a clear and exciting path for membership involvement in their campaigns."

On January 16, a minority faction of the DSA's National Political Committee walked out of a committee meeting, denying the majority a quorum required to formally approve the hiring of the individual chosen by the personnel committee to serve as electoral director.

In a public letter dated January 17, nine political committee members explained that they "decided to abstain as a bloc from a vote to hire a specific candidate for the new Electoral Director position."

The text of the letter leaves no doubt the selected "Electoral Director" is a longtime Democratic Party campaign official. The signatories state that the candidate's record shows that the person does not support "building an independent socialist electoral project" and does not "understand the limits of coalition with even the most progressive wings of the Democratic Party."

The letter's signatories list no fundamental differences with the DSA's longtime strategy of working as a faction of the Democratic Party, however. The group does not necessarily oppose the candidate's hiring, it only states that there should be "full political discussion regarding this position, the candidates who applied, and how all of this relates to our electoral strategy" before the hiring is completed.

"Who said anything about divesting from electoral work?" wrote signatory Kara Hall on Twitter, responding to claims that the group was facilitating a break from the Democratic Party. Another signatory, Justin Charles, dismissed claims the letter was "ultra-left," tweeting, "Some of

y'all really out here rendering the word 'ultra' meaningless, get a grip."

The letter does not state the name of the candidate whose hiring provoked the dispute. It also asserts that the political committee majority and the DSA's Personnel Committee refused to provide the political committee with the names and resumés of the other applicants for the position. "This entire process does not instill confidence this was done fairly and as politically inclusive as possible. This is not the first instance of committees or senior staff not immediately sharing all details with the full NPC [National Political Committee]," the signatories write.

The political concerns motivating the political committee walkout were on display at a January 13 event hosted by several internal DSA tendencies to which the abstention letter signatories belong. The event was titled, "DSA Adrift? A discussion with Reform and Revolution, Bread and Roses, Marxist Unity Group and Tempest."

At the beginning of the meeting, Matthew Strupp, representative of the "Marxist Unity Group," summarized the root of the crisis as follows: "The ability of the DSA to project an oppositional politics separate from the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie has suffered since the Democrats came to power in 2021. DSA signaled that it would not be part of the Biden coalition, but many of our elected members have openly announced that they have entered into an alliance with Democratic Party leadership."

Strupp explained that many people joined the DSA thinking it represented an alternative to the Democratic Party, but the "DSA has been in a crisis since Biden won the election." Members are "disoriented" because "there's no idea that we are out to be an intransigent working-class opposition party." He complained that "AOC offered meetings with the NPC and the NPC couldn't schedule them. We haven't even tried to make [the Squad] our instruments in congress."

Strupp said the DSA staff made no effort to educate the membership. "They stripped down the size of *Democratic Left* from 8 pages to 4. It's just a fundraising glossy mailer now."

Former Socialist Alternative leader and Reform and Revolution caucus member Phillip Locker shared Strupp's view of the crisis and warned that the growth of opposition to the DSA's right-wing character is leading to a growth of "ultra-leftism." He said:

"There's a left in DSA that is dissatisfied, rebellious, that sees the need for change, but too often is held back by a self-limiting, self-isolating ultra-leftism. We see that also outside DSA and we need to politically equip the more rebellious forces that are looking for radical change, that are looking for Marxist politics, that yes, we must harness that energy, but in a way that can be effective and actually offer a viable challenge to the leadership of DSA and labor. That's part of the discussion and debate we have."

Locker's statement is worth breaking down because it accurately summarizes the role the DSA has played for decades in disarming social opposition and blocking the development of a mass socialist movement independent of the Democratic Party.

Locker states there is a rebellious mood among DSA members who wanted to join a socialist organization but ended up joining a capitalist one. The great danger is that this mood will develop outside the control of the DSA and the Democratic Party, and that "ultra-left" forces "outside the DSA" will gain from it. The DSA "must harness that energy but in a way that can be effective" and "viable"—the buzzwords often used to justify capitulation to the Democratic Party on the basis of false pragmatic "realism." The DSA must block this leftward movement, direct it away from independent, socialist politics and toward appeals to the DSA leadership, the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracies.

The concerns expressed by these DSA figures flow from what appears to be a substantial loss of membership and a drain in activity among a substantial portion of the DSA's membership. Andy Sernatinger, representing the pro-imperialist *Tempest Collective* (comprised largely of former members of the International Socialist Organization), told the meeting:

At the 2021 convention, [DSA National Director] Maria Svart stated that membership growth had slowed to a trickle: We had not received any more information about the membership figures until Jenbo [NPC member Jennifer Bolen] leaked them: She said in August 2021 we had 94,687 total members, 77,000 were members (81%) in good standing. Now we are at 86,977 total members and 64,000 (74%) in good standing. It's a loss of 12,000 or 15 percent of the organization. It's a pretty big deal.

At the same time we got a staff report on the state of the organization which stated they were unable to reach large numbers of contacts. They just could not get in touch with them. They had no way of knowing what was happening. And among those they were reaching they were reporting a level of exhaustion and burnout unlike anything they had ever seen.

You have an enormous dysfunction on the national political committee. We've seen this in a bunch of different ways, I did an interview with Jenbo to explain what was going on. They violate their own rules, there's resignation, all kinds of shit is happening. That's not good. Yes there is a crisis. If there's not a crisis I don't know what you call that. Something significant has happened in the life of this organization.

Sernatinger concluded his remarks by noting that the DSA has failed to win support in the working class: "If we haven't f-ing convinced working class people that our alternative is useful and something that's not going to be completely a waste of their time, then that's on us."

While feigning criticism of the DSA and the "Squad," the event consisted largely of apologies for their right-wing character.

Laura Wadlin, representing Bread and Roses, said that "the singular focus at being mad at AOC and [Jamaal] Bowman and Cori Bush is a little bit of a red herring." Ocasio-Cortez still "opens people's minds to leftist ideas," and for this reason, DSA members must "keep identifying with her." Wadlin offered the most pathetic excuse of the evening, claiming that the DSA's elected officials keep enacting right-wing measures because they are too busy: "Most of our elected leaders don't have time to do the work necessary to put our politics forward" because "they're stuck doing their 40-hour-a-week-or-more jobs."

Wadlin concluded by saying that "Despite the DSA's many problems, it's still the best chance we have." Locker said, "There's not a simpler path outside the DSA." Strupp called for a "push for these fundamental reconceptions of DSA's politics." Sernatinger was the only panelist who considered leaving the DSA, adding, "I question whether there's a fear of leaving because you don't know what to do."

The speakers themselves acknowledged that the DSA's support for imperialist war and capitalism was entirely in line with the organization's long history.

Citing the Squad's votes to fund imperialist war and block a railroad strike, Matthew Strupp said this showed "DSA is continuing to follow those popular front policies which dominate its history for 40 years," that is, since its founding. "There were signals that it would be abandoning that, but we've fallen back into that holding pattern without anything else cohering in a solid defined way. That's the rut we're in."

The DSA has functioned as a cog in the Democratic Party machine since its founding in 1982 and the founding of the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee in 1972. Its roots are in the political school of Max Shachtman and Michael Harrington, based on the fundamental goal of preventing left-wing social opposition to capitalism from breaking outside the acceptable framework of imperialist Democratic Party politics.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will provide further coverage of the DSA crisis as it unfolds.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact