

# DSA crisis intensifies as Democratic Party establishment discusses giving Ocasio-Cortez House leadership position

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The political essence of the developing crisis within the Democratic Socialists of America is coming into sharper focus: It is a crisis within the Democratic Party and the political establishment as a whole, which further exposes the DSA's role as a cog in the reactionary dynamic of the capitalist two-party system.

Pressure within the DSA has been building up for some time, but it broke out into the open earlier this month when several members of the DSA's National Political Committee (NPC) walked out of the committee's meeting to delay the NPC majority decision to hire a Democratic Party staffer as the organization's "Electoral Director."

The real issues involved, however, are far more profound than the question of staff. The division in the leadership reflects growing concerns over the fact that the DSA is too exposed by its congressional representatives' votes to fund and escalate war against Russia and to legalize a potential strike by 120,000 railroad workers in the US. The DSA has lost over 10,000 members in the last year as it has been increasingly exposed as nothing more than a faction of the Democratic Party.

All over the world, social anger is being expressed through strikes and social protests, intensified by the impact of the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the rise in the cost of living. Desperate to continue and escalate the war abroad, the Democratic Party can tolerate no disruption at home. For this reason, it is relying more and more heavily on the DSA to provide the Biden administration with a smiling "left" veneer, even proposing to give DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez a prominent public position in House leadership. The aim of this strategy is to give the Biden administration a freer hand to escalate the war against Russia, ban strikes and suppress social opposition.

The Democratic Party strategy is threatened, however, by the fact that in order for Biden to draw legitimacy from the DSA, the DSA must maintain some legitimacy of its own, otherwise opposition may break free from the Democratic stranglehold. For this reason, DSA's leadership has responded to left-wing opposition by launching a campaign against its left, denouncing any political activity independent of the Democratic Party as "sectarian" and taking aim at the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* in particular.

## DSA holds forums in response to crisis

On Thursday and Friday, the DSA's leadership bodies organized two public "debates" to address what leaders called a mood of "despair" within the organization as large sections of members who joined the DSA

believing it to be socialist are learning that it is not.

These DSA debates coincided with the announcement Friday by Democratic Party leadership that it was considering appointing Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to the second highest ranking position on the powerful House Oversight Committee.

Such a move would be a highly calculated political decision. It would not be a sign the DSA is actually able to influence the policies of the Democratic Party, but it does indicate the Democratic leadership is trying to identify itself publicly with her "left" image.

*Politico* called the vice chair position "a high-profile perch to tangle with Republicans" and said it would mean Ocasio-Cortez would "take on more responsibility in helming Democrats' messaging and strategy." Ocasio-Cortez confirmed that "there have been conversations" about such a move, while powerful Democratic leaders have offered praise for her. Jamie Raskin, the ranking Democratic member of the oversight committee, told *Politico*, "I have the greatest admiration for her skill, and I'm sure we're going to be able to deploy her to maximum effect on the committee, along with all these other amazing new members."

Additionally, on Saturday DSA-backed Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders appeared with Biden in a video produced by the White House to promote the farcical image of Biden as an opponent of corporate America. Calling Biden "Joe" and reading uncomfortably off a White House script, Sanders said the absence of debt relief was "because of these Republican officials." Sanders stands alongside Biden as the latter says, "we are fighting like hell to get this done," even though the reality is Biden has fought like hell for 40 years to stop it from happening.

The decision by the Biden administration and Democratic Party to elevate the profiles of key DSA figures is also an attempt to help the DSA shore up its flagging legitimacy by promoting the fiction that the DSA's internal pressure actually has some impact on the direction of the party.

## DSA leadership "blowing on embers to make sure the fire doesn't go out"

As the White House and House Democratic leaders are calling Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders onto the stage, the DSA is working to control the growth of opposition within its own organization. This was reflected in the two DSA forums, "The future of DSA: A National Political Committee (NPC) Debate," held Thursday, and "The Path to an Accountable Party," hosted by the National Electoral Committee on Friday.

Speaking during Thursday's NPC debate, NPC member Justin Charles

(who signed the protest) painted a bleak picture of an organization fighting for its existence: “This is a hard time for the left,” he said, an apparent reference to DSA. “It can be dispiriting, but that doesn’t mean we stop what we’re doing,” he said, adding that the DSA was presently “just blowing on embers to make sure the fire doesn’t go out.”

NPC Chair Kristian Hernandez attempted to blame the political crisis on “burnout,” noting that many DSA members feel “despair,” while NPC member Sofia Guimarães Cutler acknowledged, “We’ve struggled to maintain momentum, our membership numbers have been declining.”

Ashik Siddique said that the DSA is “really limited in our ability” to communicate with the branches, and said the organization only had enough money to hire five organizers to communicate with a total of 200 branches. Interestingly, Siddique hinted at the largely affluent composition of the DSA, saying that members should be donating more money: “We have run membership surveys, and I know that a lot of you could afford it.”

Other speakers expressed similar pessimism, but none attempted to address the basic political issue underlying the crisis. On the contrary, the events were aimed at suppressing these differences, as evidenced by the friendly dialogue between the two main factions in the NPC.

### Campaign against “sectarianism”

Each of the NPC speakers presented threadbare justifications for the DSA’s role as a faction of the Democratic Party and focused their comments on making defensive denunciations of “sectarianism,” by which they mean the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site*.

Kristian Hernandez, for example, said Thursday, “I don’t think there is disagreement on the need for a working class party,” but then said the DSA must continue running for office within the Democratic Party. Above all, she said, the DSA members must not break with the Democratic Party: “We must avoid relegating ourselves to irrelevance or settling for a rigid radicalism that sounds good in practice but means very little.”

NPC member Jennifer Bolen, who postured as more critical of DSA leadership, said the DSA should continue “running as Democrats” but with “clear socialist messaging,” a contradiction in terms. Bolen was careful not to suggest that the DSA alienate its ties with the Democratic Party: “We can do this critically in a way that does not totally destroy our relationships.”

Siddique said “we shouldn’t think of these two goals—*independent organization* and *strong electoral organizing*—as being primarily in opposition to each other,” even though by “electoral organizing” he means joining the Democratic Party and campaigning in elections as Democrats. He said it would be “years” before the DSA could even begin to discuss breaking from the Democratic Party.

In a defensive comment aimed at the SEP, Siddique said, “there are other organizations on the left who are not engaged in mass organizing and it’s fair to call sectarian.” By “sectarian,” and “not engaged in mass organizing,” Siddique means having an existence independent from the Democratic Party. In an obliquely anti-Communist comment, Siddique added, “We need to assess where those groups of people have failed and pushed strategies that have not been successful anywhere.”

The following night, the DSA held its second public meeting, which was in effect an hour-long commercial for the Democratic Party. This event ended with vocal denunciations of the Socialist Equality Party.

Alexander Hernandez, former chair of the DSA’s chapter in Atlanta, kicked off Friday’s event by quoting DSA founder and Democratic Party

operative Michael Harrington, reading from a 1975 article:

How do we transform these basically antisocial structures with the urgency that is required? Not by a vague third force. The Democratic Party is where the overwhelming bulk of the reform forces—trade unionists, minorities, women, the issue constituencies—is concentrated. As a Democratic Socialist...., I have no illusion that it is as radical as the times demand. But it is just the only place where a beginning can be made.

Hernandez then added, “Michael Harrington was and continues to be right. The DSA needs to see the Democratic Party as a primary terrain of struggle.” The Democratic Party, Hernandez said, is not as bad as everyone thinks: “Not all state Democratic parties are hostile to the left.” Hernandez’s contributions expose as false all claims that the DSA has distanced itself from its Harringtonite past. Hernandez was among the DSA members who praised the Stalinist assassination of Leon Trotsky on Twitter.

Ben Davis, a Democratic Party staffer and DSA member from Washington DC, said “left third party-ism” is “a complete failure” and downplayed the significance of the fact that the DSA functions within the capitalist party: “Whether we break [from the Democrats] or realign is not critical,” he said, stating that the DSA’s goal was to form “majoritarian governing blocs” with the Democrats, and this required staying within the Democratic Party.

Davis echoed the statements from Thursday’s panelists, acknowledging that the DSA has no political program, saying, “I’d like DSA to have an actual program.” Davis was also among the DSA figures who publicly praised the assassination of Leon Trotsky.

The third speaker, Laura Wadlin, Secretary of AFT Local 2277 in Portland, Oregon and co-chair of Portland DSA, said that “tactical flexibility on the ballot line [i.e., running in elections as Democrats] is important” and that a break from the Democratic Party could not take place now, but only “at some point in the future.”

The last panelist, Parker McQueeney, presented himself as more of a “left” critic of the DSA, but he was the only panelist who actually attempted to justify the vote by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other DSA congressional representatives to break the rail strike.

While claiming he personally opposed the vote, McQueeney credited the DSA congressional slate for engaging in “militant negotiations” behind the scenes with Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer. This is in line with a December article in *Weekly Worker* in which McQueeney said the DSA’s representatives only voted to ban a rail strike because they were “not as well versed as representatives of the bourgeoisie in navigating parliamentary procedures,” calling their vote “a forgivable offense, unlike outright scabbing.”

When McQueeney continued to say the DSA should be “pointing our guns in the same direction as liberals,” this reporter posted a comment in the event chat indicating that this statement aligned with the DSA’s support for the US/NATO war against Russia. The DSA organizers then removed this reporter from the event.

The event organizers scrambled to block any discussion of the DSA congressional representatives’ votes for imperialist war and to stop the railroad strike. A DSA event organizer posted a message to the event’s participants that said, “If people from WSWS like Eric London are asking questions can we please just ignore them?”

The panelists then directed their attention to attacking the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site*, with McQueeney warning DSA members not to join “the type of organization that Eric London belongs to,” which he called “bureaucratic centralism.”

In this way, the real concern of the DSA leadership emerged more clearly in the course of the last week. This developing crisis confirms two critical facts of political life: (1) The DSA's chief purpose is to prop-up the two-party system and block the development of a mass, socialist movement independent of the Democratic Party, and (2) the fight to build such a movement is led by the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site*.



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