

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez brings the US war machine to Bronx high schoolers

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On March 20, Democratic Party Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez sponsored a “student services fair” at a Bronx high school to recruit youth into the US military. The event, along with her tortured attempt to justify it, underscores the pro-war essence of the standard-bearer of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

For Ocasio-Cortez, it also marks a rapid retreat from her previous posturing as a critic of military recruitment efforts targeting children. During the Trump administration, she introduced an amendment to a Pentagon spending bill to bar recruitment activities on live streaming platforms such as Twitch. She also advocated blocking federal funding for recruitment and data collection in middle and high schools. “Whether through recruitment stations in their lunchrooms, or now through e-sports teams, children in low-income communities are persistently targeted for enlistment,” she told the *New York Times* in a statement in 2020.

Less than three years later, as the Biden administration is expanding the war effort against Russia in Ukraine and preparing for military confrontation with China, Ocasio-Cortez has not only dropped her mild criticisms of economic conscription and egregious military recruitment practices but has initiated efforts of her own to feed students from low-income communities into the war machine.

This shift is consistent with her embrace of President Joe Biden’s key priorities, including her vote for \$40 billion in military and economic aid for the war effort against Russia, her vote to legalize a strike by rail workers, and her denunciation of socialists who opposed Biden.

The event at Renaissance High School last month, scheduled on the 20th anniversary of the criminal invasion of Iraq, was headlined by the five service

academies, which collectively are responsible for training a new corps of officers to carry out US imperialism’s war aims around the globe.

Ocasio-Cortez addressed the attendees, which included an estimated 50 students, many of whom were drawn by her celebrity. Military recruiters were given tables to hawk their academies and training programs like the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), which pays for college in exchange for military service upon graduation.

The majority of students at Renaissance High School, along with the six other high schools that are co-located in the same building complex, come from working class families where paying for college is an increasingly impossible task. More than 40 percent of households in Ocasio-Cortez’s congressional district are severely burdened by rent, paying out more than 35 percent of their income to housing. Nearly one in five children in the district live in poverty.

In the days leading up to the event, Ocasio-Cortez faced sharp criticism on social media, where commentators expressed disgust over the supposed socialist supporting the recruitment of youth to fight in the wars of US imperialism.

Desperate to keep out any expression of anti-militarist sentiment, her staff, backed by a large contingent of security personnel, blocked entry to the event to parents without children present, some educators and others who had registered to attend, despite billing it as open to anyone interested.

Following the event, Ocasio-Cortez posted a video denouncing those who criticized her and claiming that her military recruitment event was not, in fact, a military recruitment event. “Today, someone made up a rumor that I, me, was hosting a military recruitment fair for high schoolers,” she said. “Now, does that sound

like something I would do?”

Indeed Ocasio-Cortez's promotion of the military is entirely consistent with the pro-war policies of her party, including the faction associated with the DSA, which has converged around open support for US imperialism in the war against Russia. In addition to votes authorizing funding for the war machine, Ocasio-Cortez and the House Progressive Caucus bid a hasty retreat from any pretense of anti-war opposition last year when they retracted within 24 hours a mild letter proposing negotiations. The immediate reversal indicated their unwavering support for escalating hostilities in Ukraine, however catastrophic that may be.

The basis for her claim that the Bronx event was not a military recruitment event was that it promoted military academies that train officers rather than signing up rank-and-file soldiers. This absurd argument ignores that enlistees at military academies are on active duty and critical for the war effort. Ocasio-Cortez also claimed that a handful of other nonmilitary tables changed the event's character. In fact, the other “resources” on offer were largely congressional internship opportunities, which underscores the inseparable connection between the legislative branch and the military.

Ocasio-Cortez then denounced opponents of militarism as threats. “Then [social media attention] started to send strangers from outside our community, completely not from the Bronx, to drive to this high school,” she said. “It leads to real safety issues.”

Aside from the fact that Ocasio-Cortez's district includes parts of Queens and her co-sponsor, Rep. Adriano Espaillat, represents parts of Manhattan, the claim that the threat to teens being recruited to fight in imperialist wars abroad comes from those who oppose war is patently absurd. It makes clear that on the crucial question of war, Ocasio-Cortez has more in common with far-right militarists than with genuine socialists.

Ocasio-Cortez's attempt to recruit youth into the military comes as the armed services face a full-blown recruitment crisis. Speaking at an Association of the US Army event last week, Army Undersecretary Gabe Camarillo bluntly stated, “We face an unprecedented recruiting challenge in the Army.” Last year the Army missed its recruiting goal by 15,000. Other branches similarly struggle to meet enlistment goals.

Last year an internal Defense Department survey reported on by NBC News found that among a dwindling share of youth eligible to serve in the military without a waiver, only 9 percent had any interest in doing so. The 2022 survey results were the lowest level of interest in 15 years, despite increased financial pressure. Decades of aggressive wars that have incinerated entire societies abroad and left veterans returning home forever scarred, mentally if not physically, add to the broadly felt antiwar sentiment and skepticism toward joining the military.

The recruitment shortfall exists despite the efforts initiated at the outset of the so-called War on Terror. In 2001, federal funding for public schools was made contingent upon allowing military recruiters virtually unfettered access. Recruiting practices, which have been accurately described as “predatory grooming,” abound, combined with grossly illegal practices like mandatory participation of high schoolers in junior ROTC programs.

Ocasio-Cortez's intervention last month to enlist youth into the military and her denunciation of anti-war critics demonstrates the utter bankruptcy of claims that the Democratic Party can be transformed by replacing “centrist” Democrats with “progressive” politicians. The entire Democratic Party is moving to the right, with figures like Ocasio-Cortez traveling most rapidly as the crisis of American capitalism intensifies. For mass opposition to war to find expression, a political break from the Democratic Party and all of its factions is needed.



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