An Open Letter to members of the Young Democratic Socialists of America from the IYSSE

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (US)
14 April 2023

This letter is being distributed to members of the Young Democratic Socialists of America at its annual convention being held in Chicago, Illinois this weekend.

To members of the YDSA,

We are currently living through the greatest crisis in the history of the capitalist system. The bourgeoisie is tobogganing towards World War III, as the escalating US-NATO war against Russia over Ukraine threatens the world with nuclear war. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than 20 million people over the past three years. Fascist and authoritarian movements in the United States and internationally are being cultivated as the shock troops of inequality. Environmental degradation and climate change are producing events of devastating consequence. Extreme levels of social inequality and a cost-of-living crisis are throwing tens of millions of people into poverty.

At the same time, there is a growing movement of the working class throughout the world, involving strikes and demonstrations of millions in France, the UK, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Greece and many other countries. The United States is a social powder keg, with the Biden administration, utilizing the assistance of the trade union apparatus, doing everything it can to avoid a full eruption of the class struggle.

Building a genuine socialist movement in the working class has never been more urgent. Many of you joined the DSA or its youth movement, the YDSA, because you believed that by doing so you could advance the fight against social inequality, war, dictatorship and the capitalist profit system.

However, on every issue, the Democratic Socialists of America has shown itself not to be an instrument for realizing socialism or even the most meager social reforms, but a "left" cover for the shift ever further to the right of the political apparatus of the ruling class.

The fight for socialism requires the independent political organization of the working class against the capitalist state and against an economic system based on the exploitation of the working class for the purpose of appropriating surplus value. Socialism is a revolutionary movement. If it is not that, it is nothing.

Young people who have joined the DSA/YDSA in recent years have had a sufficient period of time to make an assessment of its political role. The DSA was revived in 2016 in response to concern about the orientation of young people to the left and growing interest in socialism. Exploiting a lack of understanding of the history of socialism, what socialism actually is, the DSA was utilized to direct this opposition into the dead-end of the Democratic Party.

Consider just a few of the experiences of the past two years:

• In March 2021, shortly after Biden's inauguration, DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez denounced anti-war and anti-capitalist criticism of the Democratic Party establishment and the Biden administration as "bad faith" and "privileged."

• In September 2021, Rep. Jamaal Bowman, a DSA member, voted to provide the Israeli military with $1.1 billion for its Iron Dome armament program and subsequently visited with then Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. The DSA's National Political Committee (NPC) rejected calls from within the organization for Bowman's expulsion.

• In May 2022, the members of the DSA in Congress voted unanimously for a $40 billion bill endorsing and financing the US-led proxy war against Russia over Ukraine.

• In October 2022, the entire congressional slate of DSA members and DSA-backed representatives cowardly rescinded a letter to Biden calling for peace talks in the conflict with Russia, and then proclaimed that it was necessary to pursue the war "until Ukrainian victory"—that is, the defeat of Russia by the US and NATO powers.

• In December 2022, three of the four members of the DSA in the House of Representatives voted to impose a contract on railroad workers that they had already rejected, illegalizing a rail strike.

• In January 2023, DSA members in Congress repeatedly voted for the Democratic Party establishment leadership, headed by the right-wing Democrat Hakeem Jeffries, in votes for House speaker. This same leadership overwhelmingly supported the resolution in the House, "Denouncing the Horrors of Socialism," that declares that "all forms of socialism" are responsible for mass murder.

The DSA's congressional members have supported the operations of US imperialism, participated in the ruling class assault on the working class, and denounced opposition to the Biden administration from the left. On the pandemic, which has devastated the lives of billions of people over the past three years, the DSA has had virtually nothing to say, while DSA-affiliated publications like *Jacobin* promoted the "herd immunity" position of the most ruthless sections of the ruling class. Most recently, *Jacobin* and the YDSA endorsed the lifting of the life-saving Zero-COVID policy in China, which has resulted in the deaths of over 1 million Chinese people in the past four months alone.

The DSA claimed that by electing its members as Democrats, it would be able to push the American political system to the left. In fact, it is those members of DSA who have shifted to the right and, in the process, committed monstrous betrayals of the most elementary principles of the socialist movement.

Here in Chicago, the DSA has been elevated to leading positions

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within the apparatus of the state. The DSA members, and the new DSA-backed mayor, Brandon Johnson, will be tasked with implementing the policy demanded by the ruling class.

When confronted with these facts, DSA leaders resort to the argument that the DSA is a "multi-tendency" organization and that it has no political control over the members in elected office. This is just a cover for the most naked opportunism. The actions of the most prominent DSA members are rooted in the nature of the organization itself.

The DSA has functioned as a cog within the Democratic Party machine since its founding in 1982. The theoretical and political leader of the early DSA was Michael Harrington, an acolyte of ex-Trotskyist Max Shachtman, who became a prominent supporter of the US wars against Korea and Vietnam. Later, the most militarist followers of Shachtman would go on to found the neoconservative movement.

Harrington, who broke with Shachtman only after it became impossible any longer to cover up his open support for imperialism, defined the politics of the DSA as the "left-wing of the possible," by which he meant the left-wing of what was acceptable to the Democratic Party and its ruling class backers. As the ruling class and the Democrats have shifted ever further to the right over the past 40 years, the DSA has shifted with it. That the DSA now supports the war against Russia and the criminalization of working-class struggles is an expression of the fact that the ruling class itself tolerates no opposition to these policies.

Such is the history of the DSA. Not only does it have nothing to do with revolution, it has nothing to do with socialism. It exists as a faction of the Democratic Party, and not even one with its own program. Its aim is purely negative, to block the independent organization of workers and youth for socialism.

In doing so, it relies on a lack of historical knowledge and theoretical training in Marxism. The politics espoused by the DSA leadership are antithetical to the foundational principles of the socialist movement. Whatever left phrases they may mouth, they are dyed-in-the-wool defenders of American imperialism. Those who work within the framework of the Democratic Party serve its interests by maintaining the pretense that it has anything to do with the left.

Among the most sinister actions of the DSA leadership over the past two years was its participation in and condoning of an online campaign in May 2021 by members of the organization celebrating the 1940 assassination of the great Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the 1917 October Revolution and founder of the Fourth International.

In an "Open Letter to DSA National Director Maria Svart", which was never answered, Socialist Equality Party National Chairman David North noted that an essential purpose of this campaign was to "poison the political environment within the DSA with reactionary anti-Marxist filth appropriated from Stalinism." Its aim was to cut off members of the DSA from an understanding of the real history of the socialist movement, which was defended and advanced through the Trotskyist movement.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Left Opposition by Leon Trotsky and his co-thinkers in the Soviet Union in 1923. Throughout its history, the Trotskyist movement—today led by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*—has fought against Stalinism, reformism and all perversions and betrayals of genuine socialism and Marxism.

The present crisis, which is spurring the growth of the class struggle throughout the world, has confirmed the correctness of the program and perspective of Trotskyism, the only political movement to develop the science of Marxism after the death of Lenin in 1924. The fight for socialism is not a question of cheap tactics and electoral maneuvers. It is the struggle within the working class, to win workers to a revolutionary program. But this must be based on a thorough and detailed study of Marxist theory and history.

YDSA members, if you are serious about opposing capitalism and fighting for socialism, it is your responsibility to take up this fight.

The leadership of the DSA denounces the Trotskyist movement as "sectarian." By this, they mean that it is based on firm principles and a firm program, in opposition to the Democratic Party and all of capitalist politics. Coming from political opportunists, the charge of "sectarianism" is the greatest compliment.

The Socialist Equality Party and IYSSE are willing to assist you in taking up these issues and demanding a discussion within the DSA itself. We warn you, however, that that the DSA itself cannot be transformed into a genuine socialist organization. It exists to block, not advance, the cause of socialism, and represents a privileged strata of the upper middle class.

You can contact us by email at sep@socialistequality.com. We will set up a time for meetings to discuss these issues in greater detail. We are also including below a selection of readings that will allow you to familiarize yourself with the history of the Trotskyist movement.

Sincerely,

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (US), the youth and student wing of the Socialist Equality Party

Suggested Readings

- The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party
- The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International, by David North
- "An Open Letter to Maria Svart, National Director of the Democratic Socialists of America," by David North

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