

On eve of 2023 DSA convention, leaders strategize to suppress socialist and anti-war views

Eric London
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The Democratic Socialists of America's (DSA) biannual national conventions are always occasions for the organization to try to present itself as something it is not: socialist.

But at this year's convention, which begins August 4, the effort is proving to be more difficult than ever, because the DSA has systematically violated every single fundamental principle of socialism and thoroughly exposed itself as a pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist faction of the Democratic Party.

As a result, this year's attempt to dress up the DSA as "socialist" is acquiring a farcical character. For example, the DSA convention plans to vote on resolutions

- Demanding "no endorsement of Joe Biden," though the most prominent DSA member, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, has already appeared on Pod Save America to endorse Biden and legitimize his right-wing administration, saying "he has done quite well";
- Affirming the importance of "socialist anti-militarism," though almost the entire DSA congressional slate voted to spend tens of billions of dollars waging imperialist war against Russia, and immediately retracted a milquetoast request that the Biden administration consider negotiations;
- Defending "tenants' rights," though a DSA member in the Massachusetts state legislature recently voted to raise rents on working people by 10 percent a year or more amid the cost-of-living crisis;
- Calling for "railroad public ownership," though eight months ago the DSA's congressional leadership voted to legalize a potential strike by 100,000 railroad workers against the private rail corporations;
- Opposing "Israeli apartheid," though DSA representative Jamaal Bowman voted to arm the occupation just last year, while Ocasio-Cortez voted present.

No matter how many resolutions the DSA's delegates pass, they cannot undo the organization's right-wing actions. These actions are not violations of the DSA's principles; they are entirely consistent with the DSA's longstanding role as an anti-working class, pro-imperialist organization.

This is now becoming too obvious to deny. As one former Ocasio-Cortez supporter wrote in a widely-shared July 23 article in *New York Magazine*, "We might, finally, have to admit that the too-pure-to-live lefties who insisted that nothing would ever come from all of this noise were right, and that the Democratic party is simply structurally resistant to socialist change. There is no more fruit to pick here." This article references Ocasio-Cortez's March 2021 interview in which she attacked left-wing criticism of Biden as "privileged," which was exposed by the *World Socialist Web Site* in an article that was read over 100,000 times.

But the DSA plays a critical role in the operation of the two-party system, and the show must go on. The DSA's *raison d'être* is to (1) siphon social opposition behind the Democratic Party; (2) block the

development of an independent revolutionary movement; and (3) provide the pro-capitalist, imperialist Democratic Party with a "left" fig leaf to better carry out its policies.

The DSA's ability to fulfill this critical function in bourgeois politics depends on having some "left" legitimacy, and its leaders are increasingly concerned that it has none. To discuss the present crisis, the DSA's pre-convention edition of *Socialist Forum* featured a 10,000-word transcript of a recent interview titled, "Talking Strategy with DSA leaders," featuring DSA co-chair David Duhalde, National Political Committee chair Kristian Hernandez, and longtime DSA members Richard Flacks and Daraka Larimore-Hall.

In both the interview and a related discussion with Flacks and Larimore-Hall published in late 2022, the DSA leaders respond defensively to growing support for "Marxist," "communist" and "Trotskyist" politics.

DSA dominated by fears of left-wing movement against Democratic Party

In the "talking strategy" interview, NPC chair Hernandez begins by attacking critics of the DSA's right-wing actions for their "impatience," referring to "some arguments on the negative end" about DSA's work within the Democratic Party, which, she said, "come back to 'well it didn't work so this is actually a dead end.'" Hernandez did not try to explain why supporting the Democratic Party is *not* a dead end and instead responded with the opportunist's favorite excuse: "We have to stay rooted in where we are now and the conditions that we have to contend with."

Duhalde, a former DNC official and longtime Democratic Party operative, referenced a discussion with a young DSA member who raised left-wing criticisms of the organization's orientation to Democrats. Later he said, "I have come to the conclusion that, objectively, DSA members aren't that interested in doing this Democratic Party work. I've made arguments about where it could be effective, but people don't seem interested."

Responding to this growing left-wing sentiment, Larimore-Hall emphasized the DSA leadership's central task of preventing this growing layer of radicalized workers and youth from breaking with the Democratic Party:

"We get stuck in these conversations like, well maybe someday there'll be an independent party of the left that we'll be part of. And then that just sort of hangs there. Why be agnostic about that? It seems to me very, very clear that it's not going to be, and the refreshing thing about [DSA

founder Michael] Harrington was that he just said it's not going to happen. We're not going to have a third party of the left. We're not going to have a socialist party in the United States."

Daraka Larimore-Hall and the DSA-Democratic Party revolving door

Daraka Larimore-Hall is not exactly an impartial observer, seeing as he is currently the vice chair of the California Democratic Party (CDP). This explodes Duhalde's claim in the interview that "DSA today doesn't engage in intra-Democratic Party work." Moreover, it exposes the symbiotic relationship between the DSA and the Democratic Party. Larimore-Hall rose to Democratic Party leadership from the leadership of the DSA. He is a former co-chair of YDSA, a former member of the editorial board of the YDSA's publication *The Activist*, and was also a member of DSA's NPC. The DSA and the Democratic Party are not separate entities. By rising to CDP leadership, Larimore-Hall has merely been promoted from the subsidiary to the parent company.

In the related discussion between Larimore-Hall and Flacks—a signatory to Students for a Democratic Society's 1962 Port Huron statement, political associate of DSA's founder Michael Harrington and an original member of the DSA—the two DSA leaders share fears over the growing radicalization among working class youth.

Larimore-Hall says, "A lot of people that got interested in socialist ideas through Occupy and the Sanders campaign then got really hungry for more information about what is this socialism stuff, looking on the internet, reading books, checking out existing organizations. And sometimes I think that has gone a little bit awry."

Among the "existing organizations" Flacks mentions in the program are "followers of Leon Trotsky," which today means the Socialist Equality Parties and the *World Socialist Web Site*. Larimore-Hall and Flacks go back and forth, referring to different methods to "bury" interest in "ultra-left," "sectarian" and "Trotskyist cults," with Flacks declaring: "That's the question, how do you bury it?" This hostility to revolutionary socialism explains why the DSA's leadership systematically promoted tweets attacking the *World Socialist Web Site* in May 2021 with imagery of ice picks, the weapon used by the Stalinist GPU to assassinate Leon Trotsky in Mexico City on August 20, 1940.

Need for "full-throated anti-communism" to "bury" independent socialist sentiment

The moderator of the discussion between Flacks and Larimore-Hall asks both of them a revealing hypothetical: "Say you got called up to the [upcoming DSA] convention, you know the communists are out there. A lot of folks, a lot of young people, have taken on a lot of labels unburdened by the fact that there is no Soviet Union right now, a lot of well-meaning people who just want to f[inally] do something about capitalism. What's the elevator pitch here? What do you say to all these people?"

Larimore-Hall's position is: "We have to rescue that full throated, leftist anti-communism that just floated away in the 1960s," adding elsewhere in the discussion, "Young people need to understand how much of a mistake the vanguard Leninist view—which got credibility only because the Bolsheviks won in the Bolshevik revolution, not because anything that followed that is a model for anybody. We have every reason to try to make very clear what is wrong with communism." Flacks agrees, calling

for "a principled anti-communism."

When ranting about growing interest in revolutionary socialism, Larimore-Hall becomes so hysterical that he feels the need to say, "I wouldn't be this animated if I didn't see this as an actual thing." His attack on revolutionaries as "cult members" is a longstanding element of far-right American anti-communism. At one point, Larimore-Hall acknowledges this by stating that Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy "weren't opposed to what we're saying about communism." In fact, Larimore-Hall admits, "fascists are anti-communists too."

Tellingly, Larimore-Hall derives his criticism of revolutionary groups as "cults" from a renegade from Marxism, Tim Wohlforth, who from 1966 to 1974 was the National Secretary of the SEP's predecessor, the Workers League. Larimore-Hall writes, "I should say on the record that thinking about Marxism-Leninism as a cultish, cultic space is not my original idea. I got it from Dennis Tourish and Tim Wohlforth who wrote *On the Edge*, which is a study of political cults on the right and left. They're the ones who really encapsulated that."

Justifying DSA support for imperialist war and strikebreaking

Having explicitly stated that the DSA's essential purpose is to block left-wing sentiment from breaking free of the Democratic Party, the four participants in the interview stumble over themselves to justify the DSA's role working to "pressure" the Democratic Party from within. For 40 years, the DSA has dedicated itself to a strategy aimed at "realigning" the Democratic Party, which has only resulted in moving the party ever further to the right.

Duhalde said, "How I view realignment is as an effort to make the Democratic Party into a small-S, small-D social democratic party," including through encouraging Democratic Party officials who backed Sanders "to take on institutional roles in the Democratic Party." Duhalde presents New York's Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul as having helped DSA "pass our program" on state environmental reforms, endowing her pro-police, right-wing administration with false "left" bona fides.

Since the late 19th century, group after group has attempted to "pressure" the Democratic Party leopard to change its spots. The result of such efforts is spelled out in the Chinese Exclusion Act, World War One, the Palmer Raids, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japanese Internment, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the PATRIOT Act, the bank bailouts of 2008 and the present threat of nuclear war against Russia.

Kristian Hernandez issued a craven apology for DSA/Democratic Party elected officials who voted to crush strikes and fund imperialist war: "As much as people want to dismiss our federal electeds, they've given us a lot of clout with international parties," she said, imploring DSA members to understand that "while it's great that they're DSA members, they are also accountable to other groups and recognize that other groups had a hand in their victory." In other words, if a politician belongs to the DSA and also legislates in the interests of the railroad companies and the Pentagon, they are merely being held "accountable" to their constituents on Wall Street and the military-industrial complex, and it is still "great" if they are in Congress representing the DSA.

Flacks agrees, saying, "There's got to be alliances, there's got to be coalitions, there's got to be common ground with people who don't necessarily share the label." Duhalde later repeats the same line: "What's the role of socialists there? Sometimes it's to start a new coalition ... I don't think that DSA's allies are just the other socialist organizations."

Hernandez adds perhaps the most patronizing and crass defense of the

Democratic Party when she says, “The reality is also that a lot of these things [debates over independence from the Democratic Party] don’t mean anything to the average person who’s just trying to feed their family. These are really, really convoluted structures to people. ... We can sit here and criticize the Democratic Party until we’re blue in the face. The reality is like people are still waiting in line for hours to vote for this party, right?”

This disdainful attitude to the working class has nothing to do with socialism. While Hernandez and the Democratic Party present political questions as irrelevant to workers’ busy lives, socialists fight to elevate the political consciousness of the working class and transform the proletariat, in Marx’s words, from a class *in* itself to a class *for* itself. In the United States, this entails the fight to break workers from their illusions in both capitalist parties and encourage the development of a mass movement of the working class *independent* of the two capitalist parties.

Anti-communism and American middle-class radicalism

The attitudes expressed by these DSA leaders are entirely consistent with the DSA’s historical role. In this sense, the presence of Richard Flacks in the discussions was revealing. In 1988, Flacks authored a book called *Making History: The Radical Tradition in American Life*.

Flacks is a child of two members of the Communist Party, and his own political history elucidates the development of a thread of middle class “left” American nationalism which, for all its eclecticism, was always consistently oriented to the Democratic Party. Flacks’ book provides insight into the DSA’s historical origins and its longstanding efforts to block the development of a genuine revolutionary movement against capitalism and American imperialism.

It is notable that Flacks’ political origins lie in SDS, which emerged from the youth movement of the League for Industrial Democracy (LID). The youth wing of the LID was then led by Michael Harrington and Tom Kahn, with Tom Hayden as a prominent member. Harrington and Kahn were the most explicit supporters of Max Shachtman, who was once a leading figure within the Trotskyist movement but who broke with Trotskyism in 1940 and drifted rapidly toward a pro-imperialist position. Shachtman became an adviser of the AFL-CIO and a prominent anti-communist, supporting both the imperialist wars in Korea and Vietnam as wars for democracy against the Soviet Union. Kahn followed in his footsteps, becoming a direct imperialist agent as director of the AFL-CIO Department of International Affairs.

When Hayden and Students for a Democratic Society ratified the Port Huron Statement in 1962 (with Flacks’ support), they were opposed by Harrington and Kahn, who claimed the statement took an insufficiently belligerent position toward the Soviet Union, though both signatories and detractors shared a common anti-communism. SDS was a middle class protest organization whose membership faded away in the late 1960s and early 1970s, while a section turned toward terrorism.

Harrington founded the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee in 1973. A protest organization oriented to the Democratic Party called the New American Movement emerged out of the ashes of SDS, and in 1982, the NAM and DSOC merged to form the DSA under Harrington’s direction.

Despite the fact that Flacks ostensibly represented the “left” wing of the DSA, his 1988 book presents a false and glorified version of Democratic Party history.

“Beginning in the thirties,” Flacks says, “a variety of activists drawn from various movement and ideological contexts initiated efforts to

democratize the function of the Democratic Party” by bringing in “movement leadership groups into active party participation at the local level.” This is a rosy reference to the Stalinist Popular Front, under which the Stalinized Communist Party of the United States formed an alliance with the Democratic Party and suppressed the growing movement of the working class to serve the needs of the Roosevelt administration and the counter-revolutionary bureaucracy at the head of the Comintern. During World War Two, this took the form of enforcing a no-strike pledge and supporting the internment of over 120,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans.

According to Flacks, the reforms initiated by Roosevelt during the New Deal to stave off the threat of revolution “culminated in the late sixties and seventies to create a situation in which candidates are far more subject than in the past to primary election, and a variety of previously excluded groups have formal voice in Democratic Party affairs. Still another democratizing reform has been the effort to restructure campaign financing.”

Flacks explains, “Both Kennedy and Johnson made successful Rooseveltian efforts to embrace the civil rights movement,” adding that Johnson’s “war on poverty” program “boldly went further.” Flacks credits Johnson with having “provided a legal basis for grassroots organization of the disadvantaged and for the recognition of such organization by the state.”

Never mind that Lyndon Johnson was waging a semi-genocidal colonial war against the people of Vietnam, that he dragged his feet and applied constant right-wing pressure to the civil rights movement, and that, under his administration, the state intelligence agencies dramatically expanded their surveillance of left-wing groups under COINTELPRO. To claim that Johnson is responsible for facilitating state recognition of “grassroots organization of the disadvantaged” is to turn the world upside down. Johnson was so hated for his role in expanding the war in Vietnam and for overseeing the anti-democratic crackdown on anti-war protesters that he was unable to run for a second full term. For a brief period in the mid-20th century, the Democratic Party engaged in a limited expansion of social services. But with the erosion of American imperialism’s dominant geopolitical position, the Democratic Party has long since helped the Republicans dismantle these programs.

The Shachtmanite “realignment” of the Democratic Party

Flacks presents the Democratic Party as becoming increasingly left-wing and democratic under the weight of pressure from activists throughout the 1970s and 80s: “It is clear that many anti-democratic features of the formal political system have been abolished or modified as a result of popular protest and the reforms that sought to allay it.”

As the entire political system shifted rapidly to the right in the 1980s, Flacks presents the Democratic Party as the epicenter of left-wing renewal. He calls changes in the party primary rules “a potential opportunity for developing power within the Democratic Party.” He approaches this relationship of “movement activists” and the Democratic Party from the standpoint of how to improve the latter’s institutional strength and electability, advising the Democratic Party that “Movement organizations can supply the troops, and some of the financing, that candidates need. They can mobilize supporters at conventions and caucuses in behalf of favored candidates and issues.”

Flacks further advises the Democrats that “it may actually be to the Democratic Party’s advantage that the major social movements have embarked on a systematic strategy to exercise influence on its policies and selection of candidates,” he says. “Rather than try to disassociate the party

from these movements and their activists and constituencies, party professionals would be better advised to figure out how to respond to their pressures—and thereby make use of their energies—by formulating a rhetoric and a program that can build some bridges between them and the disaffected middle [i.e., ‘middle of the road’ voters].”

Flacks’ book, written on the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, concludes by celebrating what he perceived as the destruction of political projects based on the revolutionary role of the international working class. “The demise of the left’s traditional organizational forms, and the exhaustion of many of its specific ideological perspectives, clears the way for new possibilities.” Denouncing what he calls the “elitist” conception of a vanguard party of the working class, Flacks declares his opposition to socialist revolution: “We can now see that the left project does not involve the winning of masses of adherents, the building up of a party, the rallying of forces.”

In contrast to a revolutionary program, Flacks presents a pathetic appeal to the spirit of “entrepreneurialism” which predominated in that period of global reaction, suggesting that “instead of focusing on the welfare state and central planning, a new ‘liberal’ or ‘social democratic’ politics should emphasize policies that enable people collectively to be empowered to solve their problems themselves” including through “social investment in enterprises and activities that address community needs and provide a measurable return to the public as a whole.” He suggests that the imperialist American state can play a progressive historical role: “the state can be a vehicle for democratization by serving as a source of capital for decentralized democratic development and enterprise.”

It is no accident that Democratic apologists of capitalist restoration like Flacks now find themselves playing a central role advising the DSA on how to suppress the growth of left-wing sentiment amid conditions of unprecedented capitalist crisis. Since its founding, the DSA has fought to preserve capitalist rule by upholding the hegemony of the Democratic Party and attempting to block the emergence of a mass socialist movement independent of the two-party system.



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