

After the convention: A balance sheet of the DSA, 2016-2023

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The Democratic Socialists of America's 2023 convention provides an opportunity to take stock of the role the organization has played in the period beginning in 2015-16, when an initial but powerful radicalization of workers and youth spurred growing interest in socialism and drove 13 million people to vote for self-proclaimed socialist candidate Bernie Sanders.

From the time of Sanders' presidential election campaign through the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Congress in 2018, thousands of young people joined the DSA believing it to be an anti-war, socialist organization hostile to the hated Democratic Party. Its paper membership rose from a few thousand to over 90,000, and the organization continues to bill itself as the "largest" socialist organization in the country.

But events have exposed the real role of the DSA as a faction of the Democratic Party. Sanders bowed out respectfully from the 2020 election and endorsed right-wing Joe Biden, and it is now impossible to deny that Ocasio-Cortez is simply a run-of-the-mill Democrat. The DSA's congressional slate voted to support and provide tens of billions of dollars for the US/NATO war against Russia and to illegalize a potential railroad strike. Its state and local officials also function as loyal Democrats, voting to raise rents, support police budgets, etc.

The DSA has not pressured the Democrats to the left; it has only served to provide the Democrats with a phony "left" veneer as the Biden administration escalates imperialist war and wages ruthless attacks on the working class.

The convention revealed that the DSA now stands so exposed as a pro-imperialist, pro-capitalist faction of the Democratic Party that it confronts an existential crisis, which has substantially undermined its ability to block the growth of an independent socialist movement outside of and hostile to the two-party system.

A compendium distributed to delegates at the DSA convention says that its membership is in free fall, and that DSA has only 22,000 members who pay dues each month, a collapse from an earlier claim to have almost reached 100,000 members. The compendium also contains statements written by candidates for the DSA political committee which reveal the advanced character of the crisis inside the DSA.

One of the DSA members elected to its political committee wrote in her candidacy statement that the DSA confronts "a crisis of waning spirit, bureaucratic confusion, and political inaction." Another candidate who won election to the PC wrote, "our organization is facing a lot of specific challenges: declining membership, a budget crisis, high degrees of factional tension, and a missing middle leadership layer, which leaves us under-capacity and contributes to ever-increasing burnout." The new co-chair of the YDSA declared that the "YDSA is in a crisis."

Other candidates for leadership refer to a "slow-moving crisis," a "fast-moving crisis," and an "identity crisis," and describe an organization dominated by levels of "burnout" ranging from "chronic burnout" to a "massive amount of burnout." (By burnout, they mean disillusionment with the DSA's openly right-wing character). One candidate wrote that

the DSA has seen its leadership "nearly collapse" and that this "has had a devastating effect on the morale of our members." The DSA's credibility, the candidate wrote, has been damaged "in the eyes of not only our members, but the broader working class."

Other candidates report that branches are suffering "near-fatal collapse," forcing the "dissolution of most committees," while other chapters are "on the brink of dissolution." One candidate wrote, "We are seeing the numbers of dues paying members decrease and we are seeing some local DSA chapters struggle to remain active or dissolve entirely. If we don't work to reverse this trend, we could lose the organization."

The rapid decline in membership has also produced a serious budgetary crisis. A memo written by the DSA leadership for the convention announced that "we will spend over \$1.6 million more than we will raise, which puts us on track to deplete most of our current savings over the next year." Multiple candidates for the political committee refer to a "budgetary crisis" that has come to the surface.

The source of the crisis derives from the essential function the DSA plays in capitalist politics. The DSA's role is to legitimize and promote the Democrats. The DSA's challenge in accomplishing this task is to mix the most modest verbal criticisms of the Democratic Party "establishment" with staunch opposition to any effort to break from the 200-year-old party of reaction. The ultimate goal is to block an independent movement against the two parties and the capitalist system.

This can only be successful to the extent that the DSA and its representatives retain some "left" legitimacy, a pretense of criticizing the Democrats while actually functioning as a faction of the Democratic Party. The convention shows that this process has now broken down.

Delegates at its convention in Chicago this month overwhelmingly resolved that "it is not advisable for us to form an independent political party with its own ballot line at this moment," and rejected an amendment that would have stated "that it is DSA's expectation that socialists in elected office will vote and act in accordance with core principles of the socialist movement," like opposing imperialist war and strikebreaking.

This is a pledge of allegiance to the Democratic Party and declaration of hostility to socialism and the working class. At its convention—the DSA's highest leadership body—the organization took the position that it is perfectly acceptable to vote for imperialist war, give billions to weapons manufacturers and crush strikes, but one cannot break from the Democrats.

Having set these boundaries, the Democratic Party officials who run the DSA also set the table for supporting the Democratic Party in the 2024 elections. Delegates voted not to criticize DSA elected officials who endorse and support right-wing Democrats, and also voted to dedicate themselves to "electoral work" on the "Democratic ballot line" through the 2024 election. They voted to promote the "democratic" leadership of the UAW and Teamsters, two bureaucracies presently preparing to force sellout contracts on hundreds of thousands of autoworkers and UPS workers.

As the DSA continues to expose its true role, its attempts to present itself as “left” acquire an increasingly comical character. For example, delegates passed a resolution titled “Act Like an Independent Party,” which pledged that someday, somewhere over the rainbow, the DSA will wake up where the clouds are far behind them and break with the Democratic Party. But until then, the organization must put on an “act,” the resolution says. “Wherever possible,” the DSA should “establish an independent identity from the Democratic Party.” Then, in the days after the convention, a prominent DSA faction issued a public endorsement of Joe Biden’s 2024 campaign.

The DSA convention was not able to explain what conditions must come to fruition before the hypothetical break may occur, or why it must remain a faction of the Democratic Party “at this moment,” when nuclear war and climate catastrophe threaten the future of humanity, when strikes and mass protests are breaking out all over the world and when the Democratic Party’s protection of their “colleagues” in the Republican Party facilitates Donald Trump’s attempts to return to power and establish a fascist dictatorship. The real reason is that the DSA’s purpose is to contain social opposition and channel it behind the Democratic Party where it can be strangled. Claims that the DSA’s incoming political committee is more “left-wing” than the outgoing committee are merely window dressing for the convention’s turn further to the right.

The only explanation the DSA gives for staying within the Democratic Party is that the working class is too backward to do anything but vote for Democrats. Typical is the statement by DSA political committee member Megan Romer, who writes that the working class is to blame for Ocasio-Cortez and other elected officials’ spinelessness: “What we often find ourselves lacking is the social base that can provide a backbone for those elected officials to pass (or even propose) a lot of bold transformational reforms.” There are 100,000 railroad workers who might conclude this turns reality on its head.

The DSA is hostile to the working class because it represents the affluent middle class, tied by a thousand threads to Wall Street and the Democratic Party. It is comprised of careerist, aspiring Democratic Party political operatives, NGO employees and trade union bureaucrats. They represent a parasitic social layer which derives its wealth and income from the exploitation of the working class.

Several candidates for DSA’s political committee essentially admitted this in their candidate statements. One member of the incoming political committee explained, “DSA is deeply middle class. The members of color we do have also come from privileged backgrounds.” Another incoming political committee member admits that “efforts to diversify DSA so as to better represent a broad cross-section of the working class have yet to significantly bear fruit.” Another writes, “DSA will continue to grapple with the reality that most leaders and members have come from privileged middle class backgrounds.”

Its incoming political committee members describe their past political experience as follows:

“I have worked as a field lead for two successful, electoral campaigns in NYC,” reads one member’s candidacy statement. “I served as the Secretary of my local AFL-CIO Central Labor Committee in Florida,” reads another. A third explains, “I also used my experience as a voting rights lawyer to do partisan voter protection work, including as Michigan voter protection director for Obama in 2008, for Senate campaigns, and for Obama’s reelection in Florida.” Another member is a “campaign manager for DSA-endorsed [Democratic] Assemblymember Marcela Mitaynes” and current “advisor for her re-election campaigns.”

Another says he campaigned for Democratic San Francisco Supervisor Dean Preston. The lawyer-candidate even says that when she clerked for a federal judge, she “assisted in the drafting of opinions that affirmed criminal convictions and/or sentences.” Even after publicly admitting this, she was elected to the political committee!

These are not socialists; they have nothing to do with the class struggle; they are Democratic Party hacks. That’s why they are in the leadership of the DSA.

These layers, by their own admission privileged sections of the middle class, responded to the initial WSWS article on the convention in a highly defensive and degraded manner. Unable to politically defend their prostration before the Democratic Party, DSA members and leaders resorted to ice pick memes and death threats.

This again confirms the DSA’s role as a cog in bourgeois politics, policing left-wing criticism of the Democrats. In 2021, when the WSWS exposed Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for attacking left-wing criticism of Biden as “privileged” and racist, the DSA leadership also responded by promoting images of ice picks and praising the assassination of Leon Trotsky, who was killed by a Stalinist agent with an alpenstock on August 20, 1940.

It is unsurprising that in this unserious, middle-class environment, the DSA leadership conducted its convention without taking measures necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19. There was no remote participation and a resolution on covid safety was not even debated. Though masks were suggested, this rule was not actively enforced, as many photos from the convention hall show. The so-called communist caucus held a maskless, indoor party which reportedly resulted in multiple infections. The gathering of nearly 1,000 delegates at this convention has exacerbated the spread of covid in the Chicago area, which is once again on the rise.

In contrast, the Socialist Equality Party held its summer school at the same time as the DSA’s convention, but the school took place online to protect its membership and stop the spread of the pandemic.

It is not accidental that the DSA’s convention turned into a super spreader event. This, too, is consistent with the DSA’s subordination to the Democratic Party. After all, the DSA supported the Democratic Party’s back-to-work and back-to-school campaign, with Ocasio-Cortez distributing children’s backpacks and *Jacobin* promoting herd immunity proponent Martin Kulldorff. One DSA delegate and Minneapolis Federation of Teachers bureaucrat attacked the WSWS’s coverage of the convention on Twitter and said, “The WSWS ‘rank-and-file safety committee’ did absolutely nothing to bring a safe return to schools,” a telling admission which parrots the lie of Joe Biden and Randi Weingarten that the return was “safe.”

In recent years, the DSA has played a keystone role in helping the Democratic Party control and suppress the growing radicalization of workers and young people.

The ruling class responded to Sanders’ sudden popularity with shock and concern, not because Sanders himself posed any danger to the establishment (which views him as a longtime, dependable fixture of bourgeois politics), but because the vote reflected a breakdown of the American ruling class’s century-long campaign against socialism. This poses an existential threat to the stability not only of the American political establishment, but to world capitalism as a whole.

The ruling class did not throw up its arms and head for the hills at the first sign of weakness. The Democratic Party is one of the oldest and most experienced bourgeois parties in world history, and it has a long track record of subsuming popular protest to block the development of an independent socialist movement of the working class, which is what the ruling class truly fears. The party of Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez is the party which defanged and disrupted the grange and populist movements of the 1880s and ‘90s, which brought the Congress of Industrial Organizations under its arm to suffocate the strike movement and block the development of a labor party, and which channeled the popular protests against the wars in Vietnam and Iraq back into the two-party system.

The DSA’s history as a loyal faction of the Democratic Party has deep

historical roots which primed it for this role. Its founder, Michael Harrington, was the acolyte of Max Shachtman, who had been a founding member of the Trotskyist Left Opposition in America but who travelled far to the right after breaking from the Trotskyist movement in 1940. Shachtman supported US imperialism's wars in Korea and Vietnam and became an advisor to AFL-CIO president George Meaney.

Harrington, echoing Shachtman, wanted to build a movement that would play a "a pro-American, Cold War, State Department kind of role." That's what he did in 1973 with the formation of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), which then became the DSA in 1982 after the merger with the New America Movement (NAM), a split-off of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The DSA has played the role Harrington envisioned ever since.

It is for this reason that the Democratic Party has encouraged and helped politically promote the DSA in the recent period of political radicalization. Over the last six years, the DSA has received fawning coverage in Democratic-linked publications like *The Nation* and *The New York Times* and its representatives have been transformed into media celebrities. Democratic leadership promoted Ocasio-Cortez to a leadership committee position in the House last year, and two of Wall Street's favorite politicians, Nancy Pelosi and Charles Schumer, pose with DSA leaders for friendly photos and even applaud the DSA's growth at public events.

Revolutionary socialist politics represents the total opposite of the politics on display in DSA in the last six years and the last 40 years of its existence.

While the DSA fosters illusions in the Democratic Party and uses its ballot line, the Socialist Equality Party exposes the role of the Democratic and Republican Parties and fights to win workers from those parties on an independent socialist basis. Democratic Governors Newsom and Whitmer kept SEP Presidential candidate Joseph Kishore from the ballot in the 2020 election. While the DSA promotes the trade union bureaucracies and scrambles for well-paid staff positions, the SEP fights for the building of a network of democratic rank-and-file committees to unite workers across plants, industries and national borders.

While the DSA's leaders endorse Biden, attack left-wing criticism and support imperialist war, the SEP and its sister parties around the world have been holding anti-war meetings, often in the face of censorship campaigns and provocations by Ukrainian fascists, to mobilize the population against the US/NATO war while explaining the historical roots of the war and clarifying our opposition to the invasion of Ukraine by Russian President Vladimir Putin. The DSA helped the Biden administration present the return to school as "safe," while the SEP has conducted an inquest into the response of the ruling class to the coronavirus pandemic.

The fears among DSA and Democratic Party leadership over the growth of interest in Trotskyism—i.e., the Marxism of the 21st century—was expressed most bluntly by DSA member, former YDSA chair and current Vice President of the California Democratic Party Daraka Larimore-Hall, who said in a podcast before the convention that the real danger comes from "ultra-left," "sectarian" and "Trotskyist" groups like the SEP. Larimore-Hall said:

"We have to rescue that full throated, leftist anti-communism that just floated away in the 1960s," explaining elsewhere, "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."

The collapse in support for DSA means its ability to fight socialism is waning. The crisis in the DSA is a sign that powerful opportunities are emerging for the building of a genuinely revolutionary movement—the Socialist Equality Party—in every country.



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