

# Democratic Socialists of America debates two ways to remain within Democratic Party

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In late August and early September, *Jacobin* magazine, which is affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, published two articles illustrating the debate within the upper echelons of the DSA as to how best to channel the growing movement of workers behind the pro-imperialist Democratic Party.

The articles appeared immediately after Democratic Congresswoman and DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez professed her support for the ruthless agenda of American imperialism and in the wake of a series of exposures of the right-wing character of the DSA's national convention by the *World Socialist Web Site*. They shed light on the scramble by the upper-middle class layers that comprise the DSA leadership to plug up the growing holes in the leaking dam.

The first article, published on August 30, was written by former DSA National Political Committee member and *Jacobin* contributing editor Chris Maisano. Its right-wing character is evident in the headline, "Like It or Not, the Left Can't Get Away From the Democrats."

Maisano argues, "While the Left agonizes over its relationship to the Democrats, the extreme right has few qualms about throwing elbows within the GOP. Socialists should follow their lead and accept doing battle within the Democratic Party as the only viable political option."

Beginning with a brief review of the rise of fascist tendencies within the Republican Party over the last decade, Maisano argues that the transformation of the Republican Party is the result of persistent pursuit of "a right-wing version of the realignment strategy"; not a symptom of basic tendencies in the capitalist system.

The "realignment strategy," Maisano writes, "is typically associated with mid-twentieth-century left-liberals, labor activists, and democratic socialists seeking to transform the Democratic Party."

"Realignment" was a term used by the DSA's forefathers in the pro-imperialist Shachtmanite movement in the 1960s and 1970s to express the internal Democratic Party fight to orient the party away from the Dixiecrats and toward sections of the affluent upper middle class largely on the basis of identity politics.

"Realignment" did not involve shifting the Democrats to the

left. Rather, the "realigned" Democratic Party carried out massive attacks on social conditions in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, facilitating the growth of social inequality and leading American imperialism's increasingly desperate and bloody attempt to maintain its position of geopolitical domination through permanent war.

Maisano's article avoids any serious historical review of the 20th century or the role of the Democratic Party over the last 50 years. He declares that "the American left, despite its best efforts, has never been able to set itself up fully independently of liberalism." The working class is hopelessly backward and divided along "ethnic and racial" lines and the country is far too big, he argues. "Socialists," Maisano writes, "should come to terms with ... the strong unlikelihood of ever having a major labor-based third party."

Maisano counsels that "the Left" should take its cue from the "radical right," stop worrying and learn to love the Democratic Party. The representatives of the fascistic right "stopped agonizing over their relationship with the Republican Party long ago, faced up to the dilemmas of protest and partisanship, and set out to make history under circumstances, as one particularly notable socialist put it, not of their choosing but 'existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'"

Maisano attempts to clothe his arguments by vulgarizing the words of Marx, who wrote, in 1852, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." Marx would have treated with contempt Maisano's effort to turn this summation of historical materialism into a justification for unbridled opportunism.

Two years earlier, in his Address of the Central Committee of the Communist League, Marx excoriated the petit-bourgeois democrats—far more radical than Mr. Maisano, who is nothing more than a propagandist for the ruling class—who "only aspire to a change in social conditions which will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible." On the necessity for the political independence of the working class, Marx wrote:

Even where there is no prospect of achieving their election the workers must put up their own candidates to preserve their independence, to gauge their own strength and to bring their revolutionary position and party standpoint to public attention. They must not be led astray by the empty phrases of the democrats, who will maintain that the workers' candidates will split the democratic party and offer the forces of reaction the chance of victory. All such talk means, in the final analysis, that the proletariat is to be swindled.

By copying his political strategy from the far-right, Maisano admits his method is totally hostile to Marxism. He explicitly attacks "Trotskyist sects" for opposing the DSA's strategy of working entirely as a faction of the Democratic Party. To the DSA, "sectarian" means socialist opposition to capitalist political parties.

Maisano's article was quickly followed by a response piece, published September 1 and written by prominent East Bay DSA member and *Jacobin* associate editor Nick French, titled "The Left Can't Abandon Political Independence." The piece is not a principled socialist response to Maisano, but rather reflects concern that Maisano's article left the DSA so exposed to left-wing criticism that it undermines the organization's goal of capturing and trapping social opposition.

French writes that the Democratic Party is "home to elites and there are no actual democratic processes by which members can assert influence on the party apparatus." As long as this is the case, he says, "there is little reason to think that labor or the Left can wrest control of the party from its neoliberal establishment."

"Major reforms," French continues, "are likely to be won only by mass grassroots disruption of the kind that birthed the New Deal and that achieved the civil rights movement's victories." This "can only happen with a mass movement of working people taking to the streets and striking to wrest control of society's productive resources from capitalists, and then starting to run things ourselves."

However, French emphasizes, "None of that is to say that the Left can or should attempt to start a new party now." French writes, "Maisano is right that the barriers to forming a third party in the United States are steep, and that democratic socialists have made major strides in building the Left by running on the Democratic Party ballot line."

The "Left" should avoid cutting itself off from the resources of the Democratic Party and should continue to use "the Democratic ballot line," French says, while making superficial criticisms of Democratic leadership.

French concludes, "By developing that independent party-like organization—a 'party surrogate'—we can lay the groundwork for a potential new party," and then admits that the purpose of such an organization is to promote the Democratic

Party: "This sort of organization is likely necessary as well to maximize our political impact even while we remain within the Democratic Party, by cohering a popular base that can support socialist politicians in confrontations with party elites and help the Left win concessions from the establishment. Keeping the goal of political independence in our sights, then, may be a boon to the Left whether or not we ever get our own ballot line."

French's "criticisms" of Maisano turn out to be a distinction without a difference. Both articles express great concern among the careerists and opportunists in the pseudo-left, tied at the hip to the corporatist trade unions and Democratic Party, over maintaining the role of the DSA in ensuring the survival of world capitalism.

Every political organization and institution has specific class roots. The Democratic Party was founded in 1828 by Southern slaveowners and the most reactionary sections of the emerging bourgeoisie in the United States. Its function for almost 200 years has been the strangulation of the democratic aspirations of the working population in the interests of the ruling class, which it has pursued mercilessly.

Today, the party has rejected any association with the limited social reforms of the early to mid-20th century and has overseen vicious attacks on the working class at home and abroad through the prosecution of unending wars and implementation of mass austerity at home. The Biden administration is spearheading the war against Russia in Ukraine, which has killed hundreds of thousands and brought the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation. The Democratic Party has spearheaded the attacks on the working class at home to pay for US imperialism's drive for global domination. Events of the last years have shown that "pressure from below" does not result in progressive concessions by the Democratic establishment.

A powerful movement of the working class is emerging all over the world, including in the United States, the cockpit of world imperialist reaction. To carry forward the interests of the working class, it is a strategic necessity that the American working class cut a new, independent path, away from both the Democratic and Republican parties. The Socialist Equality Party advocates the building of an independent, conscious, revolutionary leadership in the working class, firmly rooted in the lessons of the history of the class struggle, to lead the working class to the seizure of power and the abolition of capitalism.



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