

# “Silence implies consent”: The Democratic Socialists of America and Trump’s coup

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The old Latin maxim *qui tacet consentire videtur*—“he who is silent is taken to agree”—has a long history. It was recognized in Roman law and later codified in canon law during the Middle Ages. The principle has echoed through legal and political history, invoked in situations where an individual or institution is expected to object but does not.

The broader meaning is clear: silence in the face of grave crimes is not neutrality, but complicity. To say nothing where objection is expected is to give approval by default. It is precisely in this sense that one should understand the refusal of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and its leading publications to write on and oppose Trump’s ongoing coup.

Three weeks have passed since Trump deployed the National Guard to occupy Washington D.C., threatened similar actions in Chicago and other cities, and escalated the White House-led coup against constitutional government. In all that time, the DSA and its publications have said virtually nothing.

On the front page of *Jacobin*, there is not a single reference to the words “National Guard,” or to the troop deployments that have placed the capital under military occupation. The sole exception to this silence was an article published August 14, three weeks ago, under the headline “DC Deserves Statehood,” which mentioned the deployment only as an argument for congressional representation, while praising Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser.

*Democratic Left*, the DSA’s official publication, publishes only rarely and almost exclusively to promote the various Democratic Party candidates the organization is backing. On the deployment of troops to Washington and the broader military-police conspiracy it has said nothing. The DSA’s X account, which posts somewhat more frequently on the same subjects, has

also maintained a studied silence, even though the DSA’s convention was just held in Chicago—the very city Trump has publicly threatened as his next target.

One can point to several inter-related explanations for this silence. First, the DSA is waiting for its line from the Democratic Party, of which it is a faction. The Democrats as a whole have sought to downplay Trump’s coup. The main partial exception is Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker, a billionaire himself, who has compared Trump’s actions to those of Hitler, while proposing nothing beyond filing lawsuits.

The politician promoted for years as the Democrats’ “left” alternative, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, has not uttered a word about the deployment of troops in Washington, nor about Trump’s threats to extend martial law to Chicago and beyond. Speaking before thousands in Maine on Monday (Labor Day), and earlier in Chicago itself, Sanders delivered his standard stump speech denouncing “billionaires,” while carefully avoiding any reference to the deployment and threatened deployment of troops throughout the country.

The central concern of the Democratic Party is not to oppose Trump’s assault on democratic rights, but to contain and smother popular opposition to it. As a party of Wall Street and the financial oligarchy, the Democrats agree with the basic thrust of Trump’s class policy. Their differences with Trump lie primarily on questions of imperialist geostrategy.

Second, there is the DSA’s role as a booster for the trade union bureaucracy. On Labor Day, the AFL-CIO organized more than 1,000 scattered protests across the country, deliberately designed to prevent any unified show of opposition to Trump’s coup. No demonstrations were called in Washington or New York City, the political and financial centers of the

country now threatened with military occupation. At the rallies that were held, as little as possible was said about the coup itself.

UAW President Shawn Fain, whose election was actively backed by the DSA, epitomized this deliberate evasion. In Detroit, he avoided even mentioning Trump by name, let alone his deployment of the National Guard or threats of martial law. Instead, Fain has aligned the UAW with Trump's program of economic nationalism, promoting tariffs and trade war policies that divide American workers from their class brothers and sisters internationally.

Third, the DSA speaks not for the working class but for privileged layers of the upper-middle class. These layers are not primarily concerned with the growth of fascism, the destruction of democratic rights, or the assault on the conditions of the working class. Their politics are dominated by identity and lifestyle issues, which function to obscure the fundamental class divisions in society. In practice, this means fixating on questions of race and gender while ignoring or downplaying the mounting danger of dictatorship, imperialist war and social counterrevolution.

Consent, in this case, takes on a very specific character. The DSA and its milieu are silent on Trump's actions not because they necessarily like what he is doing, but because acknowledging the reality would have revolutionary implications. Acknowledging that a coup is taking place would require the mobilization of the masses, above all the working class. Yet this is precisely what the DSA, like the Democratic Party as a whole, exists to prevent.

This logic was spelled out clearly in the aftermath of January 6, 2021. At that time, *Jacobin* publisher Bhaskar Sunkara dismissed the danger of dictatorship, declaring: "What's the advantage of saying 'this is a coup'? I just don't understand the advantage in finding the most extreme labels for bad things." He added: "I've seen the stability of US republican institutions in the face of a right-wing mob and a party whose leader is committed to their delegitimation so far."

Four-and-a-half years later, what can be said of the "stability of US republican institutions." American democracy is collapsing before the eyes of the entire world.

The DSA are not babes in the woods. For more than half a century, the organization and its predecessor, the

Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), have functioned as a faction of the Democratic Party and of the capitalist foreign policy establishment. Its founder, Michael Harrington, declared that socialists must operate as the "left wing of the possible"—that is, adapting themselves to whatever policies the ruling class deems acceptable at any given time. This has remained its guiding principle.

Under the present conditions, the DSA is functioning ever more openly as a critical instrument of the Democratic Party. Its members in Congress, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, have backed US imperialism abroad and supported the Biden administration's suppression of the class struggle, including in the illegalization of the rail strike at the end of 2022. DSA member Zohran Mamdani, who recently won the New York Democratic mayoral primary, will play the same role if he assumes leadership in the financial center of American capitalism.

The DSA, moreover, is not alone. *Left Voice*, the publication of the Morenoite tendency, has published a total of one article on the deployments, under the headline, "Trump Is Openly Militarizing His Political Agenda," which mentions the National Guard takeover of Washington D.C. in passing. The Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL) has written one statement, almost a month ago, which frames the occupation of D.C. entirely in racial terms.

The role of these organizations only underscores the basic political fact that opposition to fascism and dictatorship is, at its core, a class question. The defense of democratic rights cannot and will not come from the Democrats or their pseudo-left allies. It depends on the independent mobilization of the working class, in the US and internationally, fighting not only against dictatorship but against the capitalist system itself.



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