

The New York elections and the political role of the Democratic Socialists of America

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The victory in last week's Democratic congressional primary elections of three candidates endorsed by New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani and calling themselves "democratic socialists"—two of them unseating incumbents—is another expression of a political radicalization in the United States.

Millions confront a society of staggering inequality, in which a financial oligarchy accumulates vast wealth while life becomes more precarious for everyone else. They are living through the breakdown of American democracy under a Trump administration that is assembling the framework of a presidential dictatorship, rounding up immigrants, deploying troops in American cities, and prosecuting its opponents.

Immense resources are being funneled into an expanding world war, waged by means of war crimes and genocide. The word "socialism," which the ruling class spent the better part of a century trying to expunge from political life, has become attractive again because the existing order offers working people nothing.

Trump and the Republicans respond with hysterical denunciations of "communism." Within the Democratic Party, a group of "centrist" Democrats has responded to the primaries with a manifesto reaffirming that they are "capitalists" who stand for "fiscal responsibility" and "law and order." Representative Josh Gottheimer, a supporter of Israel, declared the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)-backed candidates to be "bomb-throwers" in the party.

And New York is not an isolated case. In last November's elections the self-described democratic socialist Katie Wilson was elected mayor of Seattle, and DSA-backed candidates won municipal races from Minneapolis to Detroit to Cambridge, Massachusetts. A DSA member will almost certainly be the next mayor of Washington, D.C.

Under these conditions, a clarification of what socialism is—and what it is not—is of vital importance.

Mamdani laid out his conception of "democratic socialism" in an interview on ABC's "This Week" program on Sunday. Asked what democratic socialism means, Mamdani answered that it "at the heart is pragmatic, because if we cannot deliver for working people, then what is this for? I'm interested in delivering." He waved away the party centrists' manifesto, saying he had no interest in writing one or reading one.

He offered his own mayoralty as an illustration of the meaning of socialism. "We don't have to ask ourselves what life looks like if a socialist wins," he said. "I won last November, and over the course of these last six months, what we've delivered for working people are the very things we were told were impossible." The proof he cited: free childcare for two-year-olds, refunds to overcharged tenants, 165,000 potholes paved, and "the lowest recorded crime in our city's history."

This is a definition of socialism designed to empty it of content. To call socialism "pragmatic," to abjure all "manifestos" in the interests of "concrete results," is to insist that nothing needs to be analyzed: not the source of the oligarchy's wealth, not the class character of the state, not the nature of the Trump administration, not the forces driving the world toward dictatorship and war. The system is accepted as a permanent framework within which a sympathetic official manages potholes and rents.

Pressed on the scale of inequality, Mamdani noted that he leads "the wealthiest city in the wealthiest country in the history of the world," a city where "one in four are living in poverty," and concluded that what is needed is "a party that's able to recognize the strengths of this economy and understand that it hasn't reached enough people."

The inequality is acknowledged only to be stripped of its cause. The wealth of the oligarchy and the poverty of millions are not two facts to be balanced but two sides of a single process: the extraction of profit from the labor of the working class. To "recognize the strengths of this economy" is to defend the system that produces the want.

Mamdani's reference to "pragmatism" is, in fact, a justification for the most shameful political deceit and betrayal. The latest came only a day after his interview. As the *New York Times* reported on Monday, having promised as a candidate to expand the CityFHEPS rental vouchers that aid the homeless and tenants facing eviction, he has now reversed himself and taken up his predecessor's plea for fiscal restraint, taking a position to the right of the City Council speaker, a relative "moderate" who was pressing him to spend more.

The *Times* noted approvingly that the "socialist" mayor "has also shown himself to be a pragmatist," anxious to reassure the

“bipartisan skeptics who doubt that a 34-year-old democratic socialist can effectively govern the financial capital of the United States.”

Anything is permissible within this framework. Since taking office in January, no doubt in the name of being “pragmatic,” Mamdani has met Trump in the Oval Office at least twice, described their relationship as “honest, direct and productive” and gone to the White House to plead for federal housing grants. Relations with a government constructing a dictatorship is dissolved into deal-making, case by case.

And what of the claim that his mayoralty already shows “what life looks like if a socialist wins”? His record answers it. Where workers have entered into struggle, he has lined up against them. He postured as a friend of the 15,000 nurses who struck the city’s hospitals in January, even as he moved with Governor Kathy Hochul to bring the strike to a close and backed the strikebreaking she authorized. When 3,500 Long Island Rail Road workers walked out in May, he promoted an emergency busing operation to weaken the strike and refused to appear on the picket line, anxious not to antagonize Hochul, on whom he depends for state funds.

Mamdani has left the multibillion-dollar police budget intact and made record-low crime—the work of the New York Police Department—the centerpiece of his record.

This is what Mamdani’s “socialism” delivers: the administration of a capitalist city.

What Mamdani presents as fresh and undogmatic is, in fact, the oldest snake oil. In the 1890s, the German social democrat Eduard Bernstein argued that capitalism had learned to master its crises and that socialism would arrive through the gradual accumulation of reforms within the existing state, compressing his outlook into a phrase that could serve as the DSA’s motto: “The final goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me; the movement is everything.” Rosa Luxemburg’s reply still holds. Those who choose reform “in place of and in contradistinction to the conquest of political power,” she wrote, do not take a calmer road to the same goal, but choose “a different goal:” a capitalism made marginally more bearable.

In the United States, this tradition runs through the DSA, founded by Michael Harrington on the principle that socialists should constitute “the left wing of the possible”—the word possible meaning the Democratic Party. Over the past four decades of this strategy of “realignment,” the Democrats have shifted even further to the right, towing the DSA alongside with them.

The DSA is not a workers’ party, in contrast to the mass social democratic parties from which Bernstein’s revisionism emerged. It is an organization of the upper-middle class, a faction operating within the Democratic Party.

And it offers no genuine reform program. Mamdani appeals for a return to “a New Deal understanding of what working people deserve,” a politics he laments “you can only find in history books.” But the New Deal was not the achievement of

pragmatic administrators. It was wrenched from the ruling class by the upheavals of the 1930s at a time when an ascendant American capitalism could still afford concessions, even in the midst of the Great Depression, to buy social peace.

Today, American capitalism is in protracted decline. The fortunes of its rulers have increasingly been based on financial parasitism rather than real value generated by industrial production. For half a century the ruling class has clawed back the gains won by earlier generations of workers.

The oligarchy will accept no incursion on its wealth, however minimal. The furious reaction to the elections in New York are an expression of this. Confronted with opposition from below, the financial aristocracy answers not with reform, but with dictatorship, presently spearheaded by Mamdani’s friend in the White House, with whom the “pragmatic” mayor sits down to do business.

The working class and youth who have turned toward socialism are responding to a real crisis. They are being told that this crisis is not a crisis, that nothing fundamental need change, that everything can be set right through pragmatic maneuvers within the institutions of capitalist politics and, above all, within the Democratic Party.

This is not socialism. It is the means by which the immense social anger building up in American society is to be contained, dissipated and betrayed—and in this way strengthen the far-right.

The entire character of the present situation points to the necessity of a revolutionary movement. None of the great questions confronting masses of people—global war, genocide, fascism, climate change, the dictatorship of a rapacious oligarchy—can be resolved by tinkering at the edges of the existing system. The belief that they can is a dangerous illusion. The fight for socialism is bound up with the development of a revolutionary movement in the working class.

The radicalization expressed in the New York elections is a powerful and progressive development, but it can go forward only insofar as it breaks free of the political straitjacket that figures like Mamdani are working to impose upon it. What is required is the political independence of the working class: the building of a mass socialist movement that bases itself not on what is “possible” within the framework of a decaying capitalism, but on what is necessary—the conquest of power by the working class, the expropriation of the oligarchy, and the international reorganization of society.



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