The DSA's "Workers Deserve More" program: "Socialism" for the privileged middle class

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Broad layers of workers and young people are moving to the left in the United States. The obscene concentration of wealth, the police state attack on immigrants, the war in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, the genocide in Gaza, the assault on social programs and living standards, and the palpable sense that the existing order offers no future are fueling a growth of class struggle and pushing millions to look for an alternative to capitalism.

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is a beneficiary of the initial stage of this radicalization. Its membership has increased to 120,000, and its candidates have won a series of Democratic Party primary elections. At the same time, the contradiction between the socialist pretensions of the DSA and the pro-imperialist and pro-capitalist content of its politics emerges all the more sharply the greater its electoral successes.

This is the context in which the DSA held its "Socialists Summit" at the end of July, for which it published its program, titled "Workers Deserve More!" Both the program and the event highlight the reformist and anti-socialist character and function of the DSA. They define a political tendency whose "socialism" expresses the interests not of the working class, but of privileged sections of the middle class. The DSA is run by social layers that seek not the overthrow of the corporate-financial oligarchy, but rather a bigger share for themselves of the wealth extracted from the labor of the working class, while channeling opposition behind the Democratic Party.

A program that conceals reality

The DSA's program embodies the utterly pragmatic, anti-scientific and ahistorical character of its politics. An interview on the program with one of its authors published in August by *Democratic Left*, the DSA's official website, summed up the frivolous attitude the organization takes to questions of program and principle. Speaking of "Workers Deserve More," the interviewee said, "We didn't put a huge amount of effort into it because it was more of a pamphlet accompanying many other political campaigns than a standalone program."

The document begins with a few sentences under the heading, "Imagine taking a day off from work in a future without capitalism." For the most part, the rest of the program consists of lists of demands, about which we will say more later.

What is most striking, however, is the absence of any analysis of the objective world. The underlying forces, processes and contradictions—economic, social, historical, geo-political—driving the present political situation are a closed book to the authors of the document. There is virtually no mention of the expanding global war, the dominant feature of the present crisis. Iran is barely mentioned, Ukraine not at all. The DSA, in fact, supports the US/NATO proxy war against Russia.

There is no examination of the economic situation facing American and world capitalism, centered on the historical decline in the global economic position of US capitalism, which underlies Washington's turn to military war and trade war. There is no discussion of the rise of the financial oligarchy and the historically unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny clique of billionaires. The name "Trump"—the fascist frontman of the oligarchy—does not appear.

No attention is paid to the breakdown of democratic forms of rule and the turn of the ruling class to dictatorship and fascism, an international phenomenon that finds an acute expression in the center of world capitalism in the form of Trump administration. Its assault on the Constitution and erection of a police state are aided and abetted by the Democratic Party, of which the DSA is a part. Along with the rest of the Democrats, the DSA sows complacency and politically disarms the working class in the face of this threat, which can be countered only by the independent mobilization of the working class in revolutionary struggle against capitalism.

There is no discussion of the significance and implications of revolutionary advances in technology—particularly AI.

The program is nationalist. The DSA separates the crisis in the US from the global crisis of which it is an integral part, thereby enabling the drive by the ruling class and its agents in the trade union bureaucracy to divide the working class along national and ethnic lines.

The program has nothing to say about the treachery of the union apparatuses, which play the central role in suppressing the struggles of workers and supporting the global crimes of US imperialism. The DSA opposes the building of new organs of working class struggle that fight to overthrow the labor bureaucracy and unite workers internationally. It occupies leading positions in the bureaucracy of unions such as the United Auto Workers, the American Federation of Teachers and others.

Above all, there is no examination of the class struggle, in the US or internationally. The program does not recognize the working class as having any independent—let alone revolutionary—role. It makes no mention of the growing wave of strikes in the US and around the world. Nor does it allude to the mass protests in the US against the ICE immigration Gestapo and Trump's assault on democratic rights.

No crisis of capitalism

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In the lead-up to its list of demands, the DSA writes, “The world is in chaos, but for the bosses, it’s all going according to plan.” In other words, there is no crisis of the capitalist system. The ruling class has everything under control.

On the basis of such a perspective, how are the reform demands listed in the program, let alone the establishment of socialism, to be realized? Marx said the class struggle was the engine of history. The DSA rejects this foundational conception. It is hostile to the class struggle.

The program never addresses the question of how its proposed reforms are to be achieved, arguing by default that the “bad” people running the political system are to be replaced by “good,” “progressive” Democrats—an inane notion contradicted by the support of the Democratic Party for war abroad and austerity and repression at home.

The program makes no mention of the experience of the first eight months of the administration of New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani, the DSA member who was swept into power based on promises to fight the Democratic Party establishment, enact major social reforms and rein in the police.

At every point, the financial oligarchy has cracked the whip and Mamdani has complied with its orders. He has not only solidarized himself with the Democratic Party establishment, declaring his support for Governor Hochul and House Minority Leader Jeffries, he has met with Trump in the Oval Office twice, touting their “partnership.”

He has increasingly come into conflict with the New York working class, enacting austerity measures to slash the city’s budget deficit, supporting Governor Hochul’s scabbing operation against last January’s nurses’ strike, promoting the use of special buses to weaken the Long Island Rail Road strike, firing Haitian city workers after Trump stripped them of their Temporary Protected Status, moving to block a one-time $10,000 bonus for impoverished paraprofessional school aides, and touting the vicious anti-strike Taylor Law. Last week he praised the New York City Police Department within hours of two lethal police shootings of mentally disturbed New Yorkers.

While denouncing the Republicans, who “stoke hatred between working people,” the program presents the Democratic Party as “asleep at the wheel.” This is apologetics in the guise of criticism. According to the DSA, the Democrats are not accomplices of the Republicans and agents of the same oligarchy. They are merely inattentive. The Democratic Party needs to be awakened—presumably by the likes of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Abdul el-Sayed.

Identity politics

The program promotes racial and identity politics. This is the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Party for dividing the working class and promoting a thin layer of minorities and women into lucrative positions of power within the state apparatus, the trade unions, academia, the media and corporate boardrooms.

The program’s demands include “feminism for all.” Particularly significant is its demand to “finish reconstruction.”

This refers to the brief period following the Civil War when the rising bourgeoisie sought to block the efforts of the defeated slaveocracy in the South to impose racial apartheid on the freed slaves. Behind the call to “finish reconstruction” is the conception that the democratic revolution in America did not end with the American Revolution and the Civil War, and that the next revolution in the US will be democratic, not socialist.

This theory, promoted particularly by academic adherents of Stalinism, lays the ideological ground for the politics of the “popular front,” in which the working class is subordinated to “progressive” sections of the bourgeoisie, i.e., Roosevelt in the 1930s and Democratic Party “progressives” such as Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez and el-Sayed today.

It also justifies racialist politics, as seen in the program’s demand for reparations. Under conditions of a frontal assault on past social reforms, including basic safety net programs from Medicaid and food stamps to Medicare and Social Security, the call for payments to a section of the population based on race plays into the hands of the ruling class and its drive to divide the working class.

Identity politics is a ruling class weapon. It is not a complement to Marxism, an additional lens alongside class through which to view oppression. It is a substitute for Marxism. The DSA does not “also address” race and gender alongside class. It elevates race and gender to deny that the fundamental divisions in society are those of class. This is the ideological expression of middle-class hostility to class politics and the working class itself.

The genuine socialist position is for the closest and fullest unity of the working class across all national, ethnic, racial and gender lines in the fight for social equality and guaranteed healthcare, housing, education and all other social needs. This is to be achieved through the expropriation by the working class of the financial oligarchy and public ownership of the means of production—industries, technologies such as AI, banks—under democratic control, through the smashing of the capitalist state and establishment of a workers’ state.

Preserving the capitalist state and pro-imperialist foreign policy

The section titled “Working Class foreign policy” includes four planks: “End the U.S. War Machine,” “Free Palestine,” “End Blockades, Embargoes, and Sanctions,” and “Abolish ICE.” In not one of these is there so much as a mention of Ukraine, Russia, NATO, China or the danger of world war. The word “imperialism” never appears.

The program calls for an end to “economic warfare against countries whose governments act independently of the United States, such as Cuba, Venezuela and Iran.” The failure to name Russia and China—the two countries at the center of US imperialism’s drive for global hegemony—is significant. The DSA falsely defines these countries as “imperialist” and supports Washington’s drive to dismantle them and seize their natural resources and trade routes.

Under the heading “Working-Class Democracy,” the program calls for abolishing the Electoral College, abolishing the Senate, and replacing “the president and Supreme Court with an executive and judiciary chosen by and subordinate to Congress.”

There is no mention of the erection of the framework of a police state under Trump and the complicity of the Democrats.

This is presented as a radical program, but it is a program for the reform of the institutional design of the bourgeois state, rather than its overthrow. The DSA does not call for the dismantling of the capitalist state and its replacement by organs of workers’ power.

The Marxist position is that the capitalist state is an instrument of class rule, not a neutral mechanism standing above the class struggle. The DSA’s program would leave the army, the police and the intelligence apparatus entirely untouched.

The most radical proposals in the program document, including the transformation of corporations into public utilities, are described in the *Democratic Left* interview as “future-horizon things”—in other words, things that might be realized in the distant future. In a recent interview with the *New York Times*, Bhashar Sunkara, a founder of *Jacobin*, said such changes “might take centuries to enact,” adding that he was “perfectly comfortable to sit by and wait.”

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A history of anti-communism

The DSA program makes no reference to or assessment of the history and lessons of the struggle for socialism over the past two centuries. It says nothing about the lessons of the popular front, or the betrayal of Stalinism. It speaks as though socialism were a new idea, recently invented, with no historical record of victories and defeats, no accumulated theoretical knowledge, no tradition to defend or betray.

It refuses to discuss its own history, because the history of the DSA is a history of anti-communism. The political lineage runs directly from Max Shachtman, who split from the Trotskyist movement in 1940 and by 1961 was publicly supporting the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, through Michael Harrington, who spent the postwar decades moving into the anticommunist apparatus of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the orbit of the State Department.

Harrington's strategic doctrine was “realignment”—the dissolution of independent socialist politics into the Democratic Party, summarized in his formula of seeking “the left wing of the possible.” The DSA was founded in 1982 as a merger of Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee with a remnant of the New Left. Its entire history has been one of subordinating every movement of workers and youth to the Democratic Party, opposing the political independence of the working class, and providing a “left” cover for American imperialism.

The international working class has had bitter experience with organizations of this type. Syriza in Greece promised to end austerity and capitulated to the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund) within months. Podemos in Spain rose on a wave of opposition and became a prop for the Spanish establishment. Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the British Labour Party ended in the party’s full-throated support for NATO and Zionism. The DSA is the American variant of the same political species, and it will meet the same end.

The DSA is setting a trap for hundreds of thousands of workers and youth who are genuinely seeking a way to fight against oligarchy, war and dictatorship. The danger is that absent the building of a genuine socialist and revolutionary leadership in the working class, the DSA’s discrediting of socialism will benefit the fascist right. History has demonstrated where the betrayal of mass expectations leads. Bernie Sanders promised a “political revolution” and then threw his support behind the Democratic Party establishment, helping to create the political conditions for the rise of Trump.

What is required is the total rejection of the Democratic Party and both parties of capitalism. The working class must establish its political independence by breaking with both capitalist parties and the entire framework of bourgeois politics. The capitalist state, an instrument of class rule that cannot be reformed, must be dismantled and replaced by a workers’ state, based on democratic organs of workers’ power. The struggles of American workers must be unified with those of workers internationally against imperialism and war.

The decisive question is the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class, armed with a socialist and internationalist, i.e., Trotskyist, program. The Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International are building that leadership. We urge workers and youth who are looking for a way to fight, who understand that socialism is a historical necessity, to join the SEP.

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