DSA campaign against Schumer promotes Chris Van Hollen, a lifelong servant of the Democratic establishment

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On November 12, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) issued an appeal to workers and young people to write to their elected representatives urging them to oppose New York Senator Chuck Schumer for Senate majority leader. That same day, Maryland Senator Chris Van Hollen announced he would challenge Schumer for the post. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders quickly endorsed him.

The DSA's appeal names no candidate. But in a statement to *Newsweek* after Van Hollen's announcement, the organization declared, "We do support a challenge to New York Senator Chuck Schumer as Senate Majority Leader." Its campaign is in fact aimed at promoting Van Hollen.

The DSA's November 12 graphic, plastered with photographs of the New York senator, declares, "SAY NO TO SCHUMER." Those who follow the link are invited to send a letter about a personnel decision that Democratic senators will make behind closed doors, by secret ballot, on December 1.

The Constitution directs the House of Representatives to elect its speaker, but it makes no provision for a Senate majority leader. The post was created by the party caucuses in the 1920s. The general population has no say in choosing who exercises that power.

The DSA claims that the Democratic Party is responding to the election by shifting to the left. All that remains, it advises, is for the party to "listen to the working-class" and "most importantly, deliver."

The DSA accuses Schumer of serving corporate interests, which is certainly true. But it implies that his only challenger represents something different, and that the Democrats can be "reformed" by rearranging the party's leadership. Van Hollen's record shows otherwise.

Van Hollen has already told *Politico* that he supports House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries for speaker. He said that Jeffries, an ardent supporter of Israel and Wall Street no less than Schumer, "be given an opportunity to bring the caucus, uh, together in this moment."

On November 14, 2023, Jeffries and Schumer joined hands with Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson and Republican Senator Joni Ernst at the "March for Israel" on the National Mall in Washington. Schumer led the crowd in chants of "We stand with Israel," and Jeffries declared, "I support Biden's bipartisan funding request for Ukraine and Israel." The DSA cites Schumer's support for the Gaza genocide as grounds for removing him. The senator who would replace him wants to make the man who stood beside Schumer and pledged to finance that genocide speaker of the House.

Two days before the DSA circulated its letter, Sanders and Michigan Senator Elissa Slotkin held a press conference at the Capitol to announce that they would oppose Schumer's reelection. Both raised Van Hollen as a possible leadership candidate, though neither endorsed him at the time.

"I personally have known Chuck Schumer for over 30 years, and I like Chuck," Sanders said. He then handed the microphone to Slotkin, a former CIA officer who served three tours in Iraq. She welcomed a debate over the party's future without identifying a single measure its next leader would have to support to earn her vote.

Who is Van Hollen, and why did Sanders and the former CIA officer present him as an acceptable replacement for Schumer?

Van Hollen comes from an old Baltimore business family. He was born in 1959 in Karachi, Pakistan, into a household closely connected to US foreign policy. His father, a career diplomat, served as Richard Nixon's ambassador to Sri Lanka and the Maldives from 1972—1976. His mother, Edith Eliza Farnsworth Van Hollen, worked for the CIA and later headed the South Asia division of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

After studying at Swarthmore and earning a master's degree in public policy at Harvard, Van Hollen worked on arms control for Republican Senator Charles Mathias of Maryland and then joined the staff of the influential Senate

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Foreign Relations Committee.

Van Hollen spent 12 years in the Maryland legislature before defeating Republican Representative Connie Morella in 2002, after redistricting made her seat more favorable to the Democrats. He quickly became a favorite of the party establishment. In 2006, Nancy Pelosi created the post of assistant to the speaker so that he could sit in on all leadership meetings, and she named him chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, a post he held from 2007 to 2011.

After Van Hollen entered the Senate in 2017, Schumer made him chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee for the 2018 elections. The man now presented as the alternative to Schumer was Schumer's own chief fundraiser and recruiter.

On immigration, Van Hollen now speaks of defunding ICE and using the appropriations process to rein in its operations. His own role in financing the agency dates to his first year in Congress. On June 24, 2003, he joined every House Democrat who voted in approving the appropriations bill for the newly established Department of Homeland Security, which housed both ICE and Customs and Border Protection. The measure passed 425 to 2.

Van Hollen has recently acquired a reputation as a critic of the Israeli government. In 2006, he drew fire from supporters of Israel for writing to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about the bombing of Lebanon. His objection was that continuing the bombardment in its existing form ran counter to US and Israeli interests. Van Hollen clarified that his critique was aimed at the Bush administration and that he never characterized Israeli bombing campaigns as "unjustified."

When Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against Gaza in December 2008, he declared, "Hamas bears responsibility for the renewal of violence and must immediately end its campaign of terror." According to the United Nations, Israeli forces killed 1,383 Palestinians, including 333 children, and wounded more than 5,300 during the offensive.

In 2019, Van Hollen supported the impeachment inquiry into Trump over his withholding of military aid to Ukraine while pressing President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate Joe Biden. The impeachment was aimed at subordinating mass opposition to the Trump administration behind the objectives of the Pentagon. In February 2020, Van Hollen voted in the Senate to convict him.

In April 2024, with Palestinians already starving in Gaza and more than a million sheltering in Rafah under threat of invasion, Van Hollen voted to fund the Biden administration's $95 billion war package. It included $60.8 billion for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, $26.4 billion for Israel and regional operations, and $8.1 billion for the Indo-Pacific, directed against China. Van Hollen was one of 46 Senate Democrats, including Schumer, who voted yes. The bill passed 79 to 18.

In an interview explaining his vote, he called military assistance to Ukraine "an absolute priority" and warned that withholding it "would undermine U.S. leadership around the world." Van Hollen currently sits on the Committee on Appropriations, Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, Committee on the Budget and, of course, Committee on Foreign Relations.

Van Hollen has called for using Congress's spending power to force an end to Trump's war against Iran. Workers opposed to the war have every reason to examine how he has used that power when a Democratic president was directing the wars and a Democratic majority leader was counting the votes. Foreign Policy for America, "a nonpartisan advocacy organization" founded in 2017, who "believe in principled American engagement in the world" that is "humanitarian" US imperialism, has awarded Van Hollen a lifetime score of 97 percent. Among the votes it credits are his support for sanctions against Russia and measures to prevent a president from withdrawing the United States from the NATO alliance without congressional approval.

Van Hollen himself explained in August, on NBC's *Meet the Press*, that he saw a place for DSA supporters inside the Democratic Party.

Van Hollen's record is not in contradiction with the politics of the DSA. The DSA is a faction of the Democratic Party, and it is working consciously to subordinate the growing opposition among workers and young people to the ruling class and the military-intelligence apparatus. Its letter-writing campaign takes mass anger over the Gaza genocide, deportations and the cost of living and channels it into the selection of a more credible leader for the same party.

The struggles now emerging against wage cuts, layoffs, deportations and war require a political break with the Democrats and the building of an independent socialist movement of the working class.

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