

# United States, the Left & elections: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Transformational Vision

Friday 13 July 2018, by [GONG Jeremy](#), [STONE Matt](#) (Date first published: 3 July 2018).

**Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez won because she put forward a bold, clear message of class politics.**

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On June 26, 2018, everything changed for the socialist movement in the United States. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and a candidate in the NY-14 Democratic primary, not only won her insurgent race against a longstanding, corporate-monied incumbent, but catapulted the politics of democratic socialism onto the national stage [1].

Ocasio-Cortez fielded questions about democratic socialism on *The View* and Colbert's *Tonight Show* [2] to say things like, "No person in America should be too poor to live." The cover of the *New York Times* Sunday Review featured a glowing column about her and other candidates backed by DSA, titled "The Millennial Socialists Are Coming" [3].

As a result, four thousand people have joined DSA since last Tuesday — a 10 percent jump in one week — and millions of people are learning about socialism, in a positive light, for the first time in their lives.

## A Victory by and for Class Politics

The significance of this event — for the socialist movement, for the Democratic Party, and for US politics as a whole — should not be understated. Establishment Democrats are lurching to the left trying to catch the ground that shifted beneath them: Senator Kirsten Gillibrand quickly announced that she, like Ocasio-Cortez, supports abolishing ICE [4]. On Facebook this past weekend, Senator Kamala Harris posted an article about the minimum wage with commentary calling for tuition-free college — a policy championed by Ocasio-Cortez that, two years ago, leading Democrats from Hillary Clinton to Rep. John Conyers declared was both impossible and undesirable. Harris added that, "An economy that only works for those at the very top is a broken economy."

What were the key lessons of Ocasio-Cortez's campaign? Last week, New York City DSA activist Michael Kinnucan analyzed her electoral tactics and the Democratic Party's unexpected vulnerabilities [5]. It provides valuable lessons for us as activists organizing for democratic-socialist candidate Jovanka Beckles in California, especially since our state features a similarly entrenched

Democratic machine.

But another, more basic feature of her campaign helps explain the explosion of grassroots interest in DSA that her win generated far beyond New York: the appeal and resonance of the class politics and democratic socialism at the center of her campaign. Kinnucan emphasizes the election's technical elements. But the social forces that propelled Ocasio-Cortez to victory — workers and progressive and socialist activists — are crucial to emphasize for incorporating this victory into a broader socialist strategy.

As Kinnucan notes, the Democratic machine may be weaker than we thought. But more importantly, a clarion message of class politics is more powerful than anyone thought — even socialists.

Alan Maass and Elizabeth Schulte had a different critique. In “How Far Can the Left Go in the Democratic Party?” they ask important questions about the Left's prospects in the Democratic Party [6]. Maass and Schulte question the gains of this victory, noting, “as significant as [it] is, the odds are still stacked against those, like Ocasio-Cortez, who hope to transform the Democratic Party — because the party establishment is dead set against being transformed.”

This is no doubt true. The Democratic Party, based as it is in the interests of capital and capitalism, will not be transformed into an independent workers' party — let alone a vehicle of working-class revolution. Where Kinnucan names the vulnerabilities of the Democratic Party establishment, Maass and Schulte focus on its strengths. But this contribution misses the larger point.

Maass and Schulte write that the election shows “the deep desire for an alternative to the meek and compromised Democratic Party leadership,” but we think the much more salient and significant lesson from Ocasio-Cortez's victory and the ensuing surge of interest in socialism is that it reveals the deep desire among millions for an alternative to corporate control of our society, an alternative to capitalism. This interest in building an alternative politics will, in many cases, emerge within the confines of Democratic Party, as it has with Ocasio-Cortez. But, properly organized, these political movements can and will challenge the two-party corporate stranglehold on US electoral politics.

Since last week, millions of people are articulating their dissatisfaction and rage with the capitalist status quo — their rage at rising rents and shittier jobs, lifelong debt and useless private health insurance, crumbling roads and schools paired with tax cuts for the rich, corrupt politicians and endless war. They are now able to say, “we desire something else — something called democratic socialism.”

The *Intercept's* Briahna Gray was right to say that the special ingredient for Ocasio-Cortez's win was socialism [7]. Ocasio-Cortez's campaign centered a politics of class conflict that resonated with workers everywhere, which she articulated perfectly in her viral campaign video: “This race is about people versus money [8].”

If socialists are to consolidate, build upon, and replicate this enormous achievement, we must learn the right lessons, and fast.

## **A Clear Class Vision?**

People responded to Ocasio-Cortez's clear vision of working-class politics — universal programs, decommodification of basic goods like health care and jobs, and the redistribution of wealth and power — and her bold attacks on Joe Crowley and the corporate agenda he represents. Ocasio-Cortez also provided a strong model for a class conflict-focused campaign, one that deliberately

seeks out and challenges capital through popular support and mass mobilization. She was able to do this while repudiating the false dichotomy between caring about racial inequality and economic inequality, saying, “to fail working-class Americans is to fail Latino Americans.” Unlike the Democratic Party establishment, she explicitly tied the urgent fight against racial injustice and all forms of oppression to a working-class program and perspective.

In order to understand Ocasio-Cortez’s appeal and impact, we need to understand class and class politics, central to her campaign and to our broader socialist project.

Our society has a *class structure*: one tiny group in society, capitalists, owns almost everything; they profit off of the labor of the other group, the working-class majority, who can only survive by submitting to capitalists’ exploitation.

Socialists place class at the center of their analysis of society’s ills and the center of their strategy for how to transform society because the working class is the only social force that exists with both the interest and power to effectively challenge capital. In the commentary that we wrote [\[9\]](#) on our DSA chapter’s newly adopted platform [\[10\]](#), we explain,

*“In our capitalist society a tiny minority of the population controls the vast majority of wealth and power. Capitalists accrue vast fortunes by exploiting workers’ labor and use this wealth to rig the political system and the economy in their favor. That’s why the working class is central to socialist politics: not only are working people the vast majority of society, their exploitation keeps the capitalists’ profits flowing and society running. Workers are therefore the only group that has the interest, the social power, and the numbers to transform society.”*

*“Once workers are conscious of this vast potential power, they can use strikes, boycotts, and other mass tactics to shut down business as usual, extract concessions, and enact real change. They can also form mass political parties and other working-class organizations to challenge the authority of the current political regime, and ultimately replace it.”*

Like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, Ocasio-Cortez’s rhetoric focused on issues of inequality, corporate control of politics, equal rights for all, policies like Medicare for All, tuition-free college, and a federal jobs guarantee. Moreover, she used her campaign to invite ordinary people into a movement, raising their “conscious[ness] of this vast potential power.” This could be called the Sanders playbook, and her campaign might have done it even better than Sanders’s did.

Importantly, this electoral strategy points beyond the electoral arena. Agitating huge numbers of working-class people, building political consciousness, and articulating class interests and enemies is also what drove the thrilling success of the West Virginia teachers’ strike (and perhaps a wave of renewed labor militancy to come).

These recent victories for the Left exemplify a socialist strategy that Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman dubbed “revolutionary reformism” [\[11\]](#): “intervention in class struggle at all points of conflict in society,” ranging from insurgent electoral challenges to mass strikes, that mobilizes rather than speaks for masses of militant workers. Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign was one such intervention — one successful enough that it not only gives us clues for socialist strategy moving forward, but a truly massive audience that is receptive to socialist politics and eager to get organized.

## **What Have We Won?**

Still, we should be sober about Ocasio-Cortez's victory. Her time in office will be challenging. She will come under immense pressure from the Democratic Party establishment to moderate her stances. She may disappoint.

Even with more socialists in office, the nature of the capitalist state drastically limits what is possible without massive upheavals of working-class militancy from below. As Mike Parker points out in his case for two socialist candidates in California [12], Gayle McLaughlin and Jovanka Beckles [13] (who won her primary [14]), since corporations control the economy under capitalism,

*"No amount of state legislation can force a developer to build affordable housing. They have to be induced with tax breaks and other favorable legislation. A "capital strike" — holding off investment to show lack of confidence in government policy — means unemployment and misery. A politician that wants to look good will avoid provoking the hostility of business in action even while using corporate control rhetoric."*

Capitalists' structural power over our government was demonstrated nakedly last month in Seattle, when Amazon and other large companies used the mere threat of slowing or withdrawing business activity to force the city council, elected by hundreds of thousands of voters, to repeal a new tax that threatened their profits. Socialists like Ocasio-Cortez are going to keep coming up against these limits when trying to check the power of corporations.

But if we're going to overcome those limits, the starting point will be politicizing and organizing mass numbers of people. And as Chris Maisano argues, the key to politicizing ordinary people often lies in offering an alternative and showing them that, together, we can achieve it: "People accept the rule of capital not because they're duped by ideology and discourse, but because, in most times and places, they correctly perceive no realistic alternative to its rule."

Ocasio-Cortez's victory will compel people to begin seeing themselves as agents who can contribute, in however small a way, to actually changing their own lives and the world.

Such mass politicization will not automatically translate into a militant and organized working class, and certainly not overnight. The road ahead for socialists is as challenging as ever, particularly with the labor movement as weak as it has been in a century. Socialism, or even a humane social-democratic welfare state, can only be won and sustained by massive levels of class struggle.

Yet Corbyn, Sanders, and Ocasio-Cortez have proven that elections can play a crucial role at politicizing the working class and inspiring them to organize.

There are glimmers of hope around the country. Ocasio-Cortez's victory and instant celebrity shows how working people respond to class-based politics. Now that millions are curious about socialism, our task is to organize and mobilize as many of them as possible — at the ballot box and beyond.

**Matt Stone and Jeremy Gong**

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**P.S.**

\* Jacobin, 7.03.2018:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2018/07/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-dsa-socialism-elections-power>

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-democratic-socialists-getting-started-20180702-story.html>

[2] [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/no-person-in-america-should-be-too-poor-to-live-ocasio-cortez-explains-democratic-socialism-to-colbert/2018/06/29/d6752050-7b8d-11e8-ae44-4d04c8ac6158\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.1d9d9ee7a5ca](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/no-person-in-america-should-be-too-poor-to-live-ocasio-cortez-explains-democratic-socialism-to-colbert/2018/06/29/d6752050-7b8d-11e8-ae44-4d04c8ac6158_story.html?utm_term=.1d9d9ee7a5ca)

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/30/opinion/democratic-socialists-progressive-democratic-party-trump.html>

[4] <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/06/abolish-ice-immigration-cbp-deportation>

[5] ESSF (article 45223), [United States, New York: Why Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Won](#).

[6] ESSF (article 45221), [United States: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez victory – How far can the Left go in the Democratic Party?](#).

[7] <https://theintercept.com/2018/06/30/theres-an-easy-answer-to-why-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-won-socialism/>

[8] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq3QXIVR0bs>

[9] [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B9cQU-RREvC5Zno3VjBQTldTbXVIWng3VIN0a0ptWTU5VTJj/view?usp=drive\\_web](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B9cQU-RREvC5Zno3VjBQTldTbXVIWng3VIN0a0ptWTU5VTJj/view?usp=drive_web)

[10] <https://www.eastbaydsa.org/resources-priorities>

[11] ESSF (article 45230), [Beyond Social Democracy – On its nature and record in advanced capitalist countries](#).

[12] <https://www.eastbaydsa.org/news/2018/05/31/why-support-jovanka-gayle>

[13] <https://www.berkeleyside.com/2018/06/14/jovanka-beckles-likely-joining-buffy-wicks-on-november-ballot-for-ad15>

[14] <https://www.eastbaydsa.org/news/2018/06/14/jovanka-beckles-wins-state-assembly-primary>