

READERS' VIEW

# United States, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez victory: A “socialist movement” in the Democratic Party?

Friday 13 July 2018, by [AMARAL Aaron](#), [FARBER Samuel](#), [JAMES Shane](#), [POST Charles](#) (Date first published: 11 July 2018).

**Socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s stunning upset in a congressional primary election against one of the most powerful Democrats in the U.S. House has inspired discussion and debate about how this campaign fits into the project of advancing the socialist left. SocialistWorker.org is hosting a dialogue in our Readers’ Views column. This third installment has contributions from Aaron Amaral, Samuel Farber and Charlie Post, and from Shane James.**

Contents

- [The Democrats Can’t Be Changed](#)
- [We Should Support DSA Candidat](#)

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## The Democrats Can’t Be Changed Into Their Opposite

**Aaron Amaral, Samuel Farber and Charlie Post** | Any socialist with a political pulse should be ecstatic about the victory of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) in the Democratic primary for New York’s 14<sup>th</sup> congressional district.

Ocasio-Cortez demonstrated that an open socialist who has condemned Israeli repression in Gaza and the West Bank, champions Medicare for All and higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy, and challenges U.S. military spending can have a wide appeal — and even defeat one of the most senior neoliberal Democrats in the House of Representatives.

It is even more evidence that a significant portions of working people in the U.S. are looking for a radical alternative to the status quo — and that one that targets capitalists can challenge those alternatives that target immigrants, workers of color, queer folks and women.

Socialists should also be realistic. Ocasio-Cortez won the primary with only 15,000 votes in a primary with record low turnout. Nor is her victory evidence of a “socialist movement” in the Democratic Party, as some comrades have claimed.

Many DSA comrades work in the Democratic Party — some still holding on to the hope of remaking

the Democrats into a social-democratic, pro-worker party; others attempting to “use the ballot line” to educate for socialism; and still others seeking to prepare for a mass split that could create an independent labor or socialist party in the U.S.

However, there is no “socialist caucus” in the Democratic Party — nor can there be. Even if we were to grant the argument that campaigns in the Democratic Party, like those of Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez, have won more people to socialism than extra-electoral struggles and movements — which we do not — this would not justify participation in the Democratic Party.

The Democrats are a capitalist party. This is not a moral judgment, but a social characterization.

It is not simply the pro-capitalist ideology of the party mainstream — which has become militantly neoliberal in the past 30 years. It is a matter of the party’s financial base — its dependence on corporations and wealthy individuals for 80-90 percent of its funding, while continuing to utilize union members and activists from various social movements “to get out the vote.”

Most importantly, it is the structure of the Democratic Party that makes it a capitalist party. As Kim Moody has demonstrated in painstaking detail in his *On New Terrain*, the Democrats have become a fundraising cartel, run by unelected and unaccountable national and state committees who answer only to their corporate funders.

This makes the Democrats fundamentally different from both the British Labour Party and the U.S. Greens — both of which have a rudimentary membership structure to which leaders are formally accountable, and which rely on funding from either unions or individual working people.

Even a socialist like Ocasio-Cortez who wins a primary will be under tremendous pressure to adapt to the neoliberal consensus in the Democratic Party. The House Democratic leadership can withhold committee assignments, sabotage any legislative initiative and even limit her ability to hold public hearings on key issues if she does not “toe the line.”

The party leadership can also make it difficult for Ocasio-Cortez to provide routine constituent services. If she resists, which we hope she will, she is likely to find the national Democratic leadership funneling corporate money to a more competent primary challenger amenable to the Schumers, Pelosi and Clintons.

Does this mean that we should simply sit on the sidelines and wait for Ocasio-Cortez to fail so we can proclaim “we told you so”? While we won’t advocate a vote for any Democrat — no less ringing doorbells for them — there are many things the socialist left can do to help Ocasio-Cortez build a political alternative and withstand the pressures of the Democratic establishment.

DSA, the International Socialist Organization and other organized and independent socialists should build “town meetings” around New York City where Ocasio-Cortez can speak on key issues for the emerging socialist movement — the need for Medicare for All, an end to U.S. funding of Israeli atrocities, and what we mean by socialism.

Such meetings can help build a constituency for socialist politics in New York. We also need to find any and all ways to help Ocasio-Cortez resist capitulating to the Democrats — first and foremost building independent movements and struggles as the basis for truly independent politics in the coming years.

Clearly, U.S. politics are in flux — posing important challenges for the socialist left and especially those of us from the tradition of revolutionary socialism from below. Historically, all the attempts to “use” or “transform” the Democratic Party for working class and popular, or socialists goals have

ended in disaster.

Clearly, many good comrades disagree with this analysis. Whatever our differences, we need to work together building real resistance in the streets and workplaces, honestly assessing various attempts to use the electoral arena to build socialist and pro-working-class politics, and continuing comradely debate to clarify our path forward.

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## **We Should Support DSA Candidates**

**Shane James** | The International Socialist Organization wants to help build working-class political independence in the U.S. How does our relationship to the Democratic Socialists of America and its electoral efforts effect our project?

Revolutionary socialists argue that working-class independence must be won by a movement from below — led by radical social movements, militant labor unions, and a broad layer of socialist cadre.

The recent struggles of rank-and-file union militants show a way forward for the labor movement. Social movements have raised popular, radical critiques of American society while training a new generation of working-class activists to fight oppression [1].

Yet even combined, these forces are not prepared to take on the peculiarities of U.S. politics — including the two-party system — or the pervasive ideology of “lesser evilism.”

The working class needs more organization and experience in class struggle before it will develop a movement to strike out for political independence. We also need a lot more socialist cadre embedded in working-class struggles to deepen class consciousness and argue for independence.

The Sanders campaign revealed that social democratic ideas appeal to millions of American workers. Since the Sanders campaign, the DSA has grown from 5,000 to over 45,000 members. DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez defeated a leading Democrat and raised socialist politics to a national profile.

Socialism is not a bad word anymore. After decades of war and neoliberal onslaught, working-class radicals are understandably excited by these developments.

These campaigns have also provoked political conflict between the Democratic Party and the progressive-left American milieu tied to it for lack of an alternative. Social movements directly confronted the Democratic Party in the 2016 elections [2] and Sanders supporters protested the party for its dirty sabotage of Sanders’ campaign [3].

The left has had a great opportunity to sharpen the conflict between the Democratic Party and the working class in these elections.

We should remain cautious of supporting Democratic tickets. We were right to not back Sanders [4]. The Democratic Party is not the home for a left political force [5].

For us in the ISO, however, we need to reframe the discussion. What is the ISO’s relationship to the DSA — which some argue may be the embryo of a mass socialist organization? How do electoral

campaigns impact the DSA's political development, and our own relationship to the revitalizing American socialist movement?

There is a debate within the DSA between those who want to realign the Democrats to socialist politics and those who want independence from the Democrats. The ISO should collaborate with the left of the DSA to continue arguing for the importance of working-class political independence.

These debates are happening in left media like Socialist Worker, Jacobin and various podcasts. We can also discuss our perspectives at Socialism conferences, Jacobin reading groups and local public forums co-hosted with the DSA. This debate is critical to the political orientation of the DSA and the broader U.S. socialist movement for years to come.

But when Ocasio-Cortez goes to Congress next year, and the DSA backs bona fide socialist candidates in 2020, we should critically support them.

Socialists running as Democrats — it's going to happen. Let's call it the growing pains of a movement that appeared totally marginalized until the Sanders campaign.

Although in the long term, socialists must focus on strengthening radical working-class organization, electoral campaigns have some advantages in the present moment — normalizing socialism during an era of radicalization and spurring political conflict with the Democrats.

Furthermore, these campaigns provide an opportunity to argue that accountability to social movements must be the basis for any left political force — and that this cannot be accomplished through the Democrats. Finally, critical support allows us to develop credibility as allies in these debates, rather than appear as sectarian outsiders.

It's also pretty damn exciting to see socialists win.

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## **P.S.**

\* Socialist Worker, July 11, 2018:

<http://socialistworker.org/2018/07/11/a-socialist-movement-in-the-democratic-party>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>

[2] <http://time.com/4237111/black-lives-matter-hillary-clinton-protest/>

[3] <https://www.npr.org/2016/07/26/487560887/they-cannot-silence-us-sanders-supporters-protest-after-clinton-nomination>

[4] <http://thehill.com/homenews/senate/394449-bernie-sanders-sarah-sanders-has-the-right-to-go-into-a-restaurant-and-have>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/06/democrats-immigration-midterms/563987/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/20/us/politics/bernie-sanders-democrats-midterms.html>

<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/21/bernie-sanders-democrats-2018-599331>

[5] <https://www.haymarketbooks.org/books/431-the-democrats>

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/democratic-party-realignment-civil-rights-mcgovern-meany-rustin-sanders>

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