

US Revolutionaries, Elections and the Democrats

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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. ESSF is reproducing a selection of the contributions to the debate which SocialistWorker.org is hosting in its Readers' Views column.

What Will Build a Revolutionary Socialist Movement?

Todd Chretien | Like all participants in this debate, I want to thank the *Socialist Worker* team and all those willing to share their points of view.

I wanted to start my thoughts on the socialist movement today by going back to 2009, when [Newsweek ran a cover proclaiming](#) “we’re all socialists now” in the wake of the Great Recession and Barack Obama’s (tepid) economic stimulus package.

Since then, the “we’re all socialists” sentiment has developed — with boosts from the Arab Spring, Occupy, the Chicago teachers’ strike, Black Lives Matter, the rise of independent media like *Jacobin* magazine and more — from an inchoate rejection of capitalism to a significant growth of organization, most clearly with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) growing from 6,000 to 45,000 members over the last two years since Bernie Sanders’ 2016 campaign.

DSA’s membership is outraged by the Democratic Party’s subservience to the “millionaires and billionaires” and inspired by Sanders’ call for a political revolution. *Jacobin* founding editor Bhaskar Sunkara has dubbed the majority of new DSA members “Berniecrats.”

I won’t quibble with his characterization as long as we recognize that their radicalization extends beyond a critique of the Democratic National Committee.

Thousands of DSA members are committed to building movements (shutting down ICE, fighting for housing justice, defending reproductive rights, etc.), revitalizing the labor movement (helping organize teachers’ strikes) and taking direct action against the right (mobilizing against fascists from Charlottesville to Boston to Berkeley and hounding Trump’s minions).

Of course, Sanders remains far and away the most influential voice among DSA’s broad membership, and his forthright insistence that socialists must “take back” the Democratic Party holds sway among most. This was the DSA’s historic position, and there are many within it today who remain committed to this goal.

However, there are DSA organizers who forthrightly insist that the Democratic Party is an obstacle that must be overcome. They argue that it is a capitalist institution that cannot be “realigned” or “reformed,” but must be defeated and replaced with a working-class, socialist party.

Here, we come to the nub of the current debate that has been taking place among International Socialist Organization (ISO) members in the pages of *Socialist Worker*, although the issues clearly overlap with debates inside the DSA and other sections of the new socialist movement.

How can we challenge the two-party system?

[Hadas Thier wrote earlier this week](#): “The calculation of our comrades in the Democratic Socialists of America...that the ground is not yet ready for a third party is, I believe, correct.”

This raises an interesting question. Why is the ground not ready?

Hadas references [Ralph Nader’s campaign in 2000](#), which received 2.9 million votes, despite the Democratic Party carrying out the same kind of dirty tricks it used against Sanders in 2016. And I think we can all agree that everything about American capitalism has gotten much worse since 2000.

If Nader, an idiosyncratic figure who was vilified by the Democrats, could win nearly 3 million votes, couldn’t Bernie do as well or better, even while running as an independent? Couldn’t DSA candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Jovanka Beckles and Julia Salazar make sustained inroads at the local level running as independents?

Of course they could. But here’s the kicker: They probably couldn’t *win* in the short term.

So when Hadas says DSA comrades are correct that “the ground is not yet ready,” it seems to me that she also means “not ready” for a radical party outside the Democrats that can rack up electoral victories in the short term.

Empirically, on that count, I believe she is correct in all but exceptional circumstances, like Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant’s successes.

This is exactly what many of our comrades in DSA argue. In fact, the results for DSA-backed candidates Gayle McLaughlin and Jovanka Beckles in California [proved this point in stark terms in June](#). Running as an independent, McLaughlin received 4 percent, while Beckles (in the Democratic Party primary) won 15.8 percent, making it through to the November general election.

What are the consequences of prioritizing electoral viability?

Two years ago, DSA member Seth Ackerman wrote an influential article for *Jacobin* called [“Blueprint for a New Party.”](#) Along with an incisive critique of the capitalist nature of the Democratic Party, Ackerman argued for a “ballot line” strategy, whereby DSA members would attempt to build socialist forces by running in Democratic primaries “more often, at least at first,” although he didn’t exclude independent campaigns.

[Writing again last week](#), Ackerman noted that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez victory in New York confirmed the efficacy of this general approach, which, he wrote, was powering “the idea of independent, organized left-wing electoral politics [that] has taken on a life of its own.”

There is no doubt that Ocasio-Cortez’s victory has spurred interest in socialist ideas, a dynamic we should all welcome for reasons that are obvious. But is Ackerman right that her victory is a victory for “independent” campaigns? If so, how does Ocasio-Cortez’s [decision to endorse](#) Kansas Republican-turned-Democrat James Thompson fit in?

I don’t fault Ocasio-Cortez for appearing with Sanders and Thompson. She, as far as I can tell, is

being true to her word and her conception of political strategy at this stage. But Ackerman, for his part, seems to be recalibrating what it means to “use” the ballot line by quoting Ocasio-Cortez on the question of forming a new caucus in Congress:

The thing that gives a caucus power is that they can operate as a bloc vote to get things done. Even if you can carve out a sub-caucus of the Progressive Caucus, a smaller bloc but one that operates as a bloc, then you can generate real power...I think that if you can even carve out a caucus of ten, thirty people, it does not take a lot if you operate as a bloc vote to really make strong demands on things.

Presumably, Ocasio-Cortez would include Thompson in her bloc (otherwise why endorse him?), as well as other progressive Democrats. But this seems far afield from “independent, left-wing electoral campaigns” and using the ballot line to assemble socialist grassroots organization.

I contend that the idea that you can “generate real power” in Congress is directly connected to a strategy that prioritizes winning races.

At a minimum, this promotes a conception of socialism that is heavily inflected with electoralism, and one that can become easily disarmed in any efforts to build independent campaigns before the far stronger influence of advocates of staying in the Democratic Party, such as Sanders.

DSA comrades are committed to this strategy and are willing to fight to try to make it work. We can recognize their efforts as an experiment from which we will all learn lessons. But we don’t have to join in.

It’s worth saying that I believe there are DSA comrades who are committed to a more, let us say, ruthless attempt to use the “ballot line” strategy to gather forces and prepare for a new socialist party more quickly. At this point, my assessment is that these comrades are a small minority of DSA, and they underestimate the challenges, both immediate and mid-term, of carrying out such a strategy.

For these reasons, I am not convinced of Hadas’ warning that refusing to run or support candidates in the Democratic Party “will leave us a small organization, isolated from a growing left.” Quite the opposite, I think it positions us to play a unique role.

A new socialist movement

This brings me to related criticisms raised by two other comrades.

[Dorian Bon writes](#) that Sanders’ campaign and Ocasio-Cortez’s victory “disproved [the ISO’s] belief that socialism can never be built in any form through the Democratic Party.”

As a matter of record, Dorian is mistaken. The revolutionary socialist movement has long acknowledged that the Communist Party of the 1930s grew tremendously during its Popular Front support for Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal administration.

The problem lies in what the CP built as the party dismantled its previous principled opposition to Jim Crow and broke strikes in order to curry favor with the Democrats. This destroyed a working-class vanguard three generations in the making.

What the ISO *has* said is that we will work whenever possible to build a broad socialist movement

(and working-class and social movements in general) while simultaneously insisting that *genuine* socialism can only come through the self-emancipation of the working class.

Dorian then asks: “[W]ill we argue not to vote for or support [socialists] when they run as Democrats, even while they are contributing positively to the growth of *our* common struggle.”

My simple answer is: Yes. We will argue that they should not run as Democrats because, as I’ve tried to show, it’s not really “just” about a ballot line, and there are multiple other ways to build “our common struggle.”

Does this mean our answer stops there? I don’t think so. In fact, I’m very optimistic about the development of the new socialist movement and the role the ISO can play in helping strengthen its *revolutionary* wing, which brings me to my last point.

Electoral strategies can be [critical to building a revolutionary socialist organization](#). In her contribution, Fainan Lakha suggests that “there is something deeply persuasive about a discussion of the “dirty break” from the Democratic Party” — referencing a discussion of a strategy of building up forces with the Democrats with the aim of breaking and forming an independent party.

I don’t rule out the hypothetical potential for something like this happening. However, at a minimum, I think it would require three things: first, a qualitatively higher level of sustained class struggle to create a working-class vanguard of tens of thousands of revolutionary workers and powerful unions; two, a tightly organized core of thousands of revolutionaries inside a future DSA (or DSA-like organization) consciously committed to such a strategy; and three, a significant number of revolutionary socialists who have built up a previously independent base with a strong organization, who did not waste years entangled in Popular Front-type relations.

I submit that none of those conditions exist today. But would the pace of events be compressed if the ISO joined forces with those inside DSA pursuing this line? [Fainan invokes French revolutionary socialist Daniel Bensaïd](#), who once argued that we must be willing to take “leaps, leaps, leaps,” to imply exactly this.

I’m also an admirer of Bensaïd, but I think a different insight is more relevant in this context. In the following passage, he is describing the dynamics of revolutionary socialists entering Stalinist or social-democratic parties, so we might expect that entering the Democratic Party provides even less favorable terrain. Regardless, Bensaïd’s warning is that there is “a high price to pay.”

Revolutionaries, Bensaïd writes, often begin to “imagine” what their new party could do:

if only its leaders...were revolutionary. In this way, they enter a make-believe world in which pedagogy is substituted for building a new relation of forces. Living as parasites in a foreign apparatus, bit by bit, they lose their own organizational culture, something that is not easily recovered...[And] the new militants who are influenced in this work are won over to a posture of subaltern criticism [within the hostile party] as opposed to a really independent practice.

There are historical moments when revolutionaries have no choice but to run the enormous risk that Bensaïd describes. In my opinion, we are fortunate that we face no such circumstances. Instead, opportunities abound.

We should give serious thought to running or supporting (DSA, ISO or other) independent socialist,

labor and social movement candidates, as well as backing referendums around health care, education, taxing the rich and more.

Even as I write, ISO branches are working with DSA comrades in the Bay Area and Washington, D.C., to organize against the Nazis when they plan mobilizations on August 5 and 12 respectively.

The Portland, Maine, ISO and DSA chapters have initiated a coalition to pressure Sen. Susan Collins to vote against confirming Brett Kavanaugh as a Supreme Court justice. ISO and DSA members organized arm-in-arm to build solidarity for the “red state” teachers’ strikes last spring with the expectation of more to come this fall.

I wholeheartedly agree with Hadas that we should “work alongside [DSA comrades], and attempt to explain and to *learn* along the way.” I just don’t believe we need to adopt what would either be a short-term tactic or — far more likely, in my view — a long-term trap to do so.

What are the stakes?

As revolutionary socialists, I want to flag an assumption we all share that may not be apparent to *SW* readers who are not members of the ISO: We are committed to a democratic-centralist method of organization that guarantees “freedom of discussion” and insists on “unity in action.”

Comrades may argue for changes in the ISO’s program or principles — or for specific strategies or tactics — but we don’t act on these views as individuals. We exchange ideas, when necessary we debate and vote, and when a majority decides on an important issue, we act according to the will of the majority. If the majority view proves to be ineffective, then those with a minority view can argue for a course correction, and try to become the majority.

Thus, this debate is not an abstract dispute for ISO members, but a question of what collective action we take as a national organization.

The ISO is the largest revolutionary socialist organization in the U.S. I believe we have enormous opportunities ahead of us that will contribute to the building of a socialist movement beyond our organization. As Los Angeles teacher and ISO member Gillian Russom [put it at Socialism 2018](#), speaking alongside educators from around the country:

For the last 50 years, the politics of socialism have largely been severed from the working-class movement...Out of this strike wave and the outrage against all the horrors happening around us, there’s new generation of radicals and socialists being born — and we have an urgent need for more organized socialists.

Todd Chretien

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