

The Democratic Party politics of the “Democratic Socialists of America”

By Joseph Kishore
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The Democratic Socialists of America is holding its annual convention beginning today in Atlanta, Georgia. The convention, like the DSA itself, is a Democratic Party operation. Under the cloak of “socialism,” its main purpose is to rally broader support for the right-wing, militarist agenda of the Democrats.

More significant than what is on the agenda of the DSA convention is what has been left off. In the 85 proposed resolutions, there is hardly a mention of US foreign policy, imperialism or war. There is no mention of the reactionary anti-Russia campaign, which has been at the center of the Democrats’ opposition to the Trump administration, or of the increasingly provocative actions of Trump against China, which the Democrats support.

On the eve of the convention, a US federal court judge dismissed “with prejudice” the Democratic National Committee’s civil case against WikiLeaks, delivering a devastating blow to the Democrats’ efforts to target Assange for exposing the operations of the Democratic Party and the crimes of American imperialism. The persecution of Assange will not be a subject of discussion at the DSA convention.

More than a century ago, Leon Trotsky described the Socialist Party led by Morris Hillquit as an organization for “successful dentists.” One can only imagine how Trotsky would have described the DSA.

The convention resolutions reek of small-minded middle-class provincialism and nationalism. No one reading the resolutions—and least of all the DSA delegates—would have any idea that the world capitalist system is confronting a monumental crisis, or that the ruling class internationally is promoting far-right and fascist forces. Indeed, the DSA does not seem to realize that there exists a world outside the boundaries of the United States. The past year has seen a

significant growth of class struggle internationally—from the Yellow Vest protests in France, to mass demonstrations in Algeria and Sudan, to a series of strikes in Mexico and throughout Latin America. These developments, however, do not receive a mention.

The various resolutions and proposals submitted by factions of the DSA to the conference fall under two broad categories: “electoral strategy” and “labor.”—The first category focuses on plans to elect a Democrat as president in 2020. The second category is directed toward propping up the corrupt and reactionary AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which has betrayed every working-class struggle for the last 40 years.

In relation to the electoral strategy, the DSA has already announced its endorsement of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party primary elections for president. In the 2016 elections, Sanders, backed by the DSA, channeled a leftward movement of workers and youth behind Hillary Clinton, the candidate of Wall Street and the military, whom he endorsed in the general elections. Sanders, who has served in the Democratic Party leadership in the Senate for the past two-and-a-half years, is reprising this role in 2020.

A similar role is being played by the DSA’s two members in the US House of Representatives, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (New York) and Rashida Tlaib (Detroit). Both congresswomen exhibited their political bankruptcy last week when they voted for a budget deal crafted by the Democratic Party leadership and the Trump administration, which includes a record \$738 billion in spending on the military.

A fundamental principle of socialist politics is that its deputies do not under any circumstances cast a vote in favor of the budget of the capitalist state. One can be

fairly certain that Ocasio-Cortez and Tlaib have never heard of this or any other socialist principle. But that would not have stopped them even if they had, by accident, actually read something about socialist history. Ocasio-Cortez and Tlaib voted for a budget that Trump himself hailed for “greatly [helping] our military.”

All the various factions within the DSA are working on the best way to channel opposition behind the Democratic Party in the upcoming election. One resolution, associated with the North Star caucus, declares that the “defeat of Trumpism is ... the most important political task of our time,” that is, that the DSA must support whatever Democratic Party candidates are chosen.

The nominally more “left” Bread & Roses faction, associated with *Jacobin* magazine and its publisher, Bhaskar Sunkara, states that the DSA should be “committed to building political organization independent of the Democratic Party.” But that is an ideal whose realization is best left to Sunkara’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In the meantime, Bread & Roses fully endorses support for Sanders in the Democratic Party primaries, which *Jacobin* has made the center of its political strategy.

But Sunkara, ever the pragmatic realist, has made clear that he will support whomever the Democrats eventually nominate, declaring in an interview with the *New York Times* in May that “the mentality has to be to call for people to vote for Joe Biden, especially in swing states” and “avoid a third-party candidate.” *Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg, a supporter of Hillary Clinton, responded by praising Sunkara and the DSA for “trying to channel people away from [radical politics]... People in the DSA, Bhaskar, they’re very responsible in not encouraging that sort of thing.”

Similarly, the various proposals on “labor” all revolve around supporting the trade union bureaucracy. Over the past year, the DSA has aggressively promoted the teachers’ unions as they have isolated and betrayed a series of strikes—including in West Virginia, Arizona, Los Angeles and Oakland.

Several factions within the DSA are urging a so-called “rank-and-file strategy,” long associated with *Labor Notes*, many of whose members are now in the DSA. The aim of this strategy is to build “left” factions within the trade unions to bolster their organizational

domination over the working class while also opening up lucrative positions within the union apparatus.

From its origins, the DSA has been nothing more than a faction of the Democratic Party. Michael Harrington, who founded the DSA in 1982, defined its politics as the “left wing of the possible”—that is, what is acceptable to the capitalist Democratic Party.

If the Democratic Socialist of America’s support for the military budget of American imperialism makes clear that it has nothing to do with “socialism,” its silent complicity with the persecution of Assange proves that the DSA has no commitment to “democracy.” It speaks for privileged sections of the upper middle class that support the imperialist foreign policy of the ruling class and oppose the efforts of workers to break free from the organizational stranglehold of the trade unions.

Among the delegates to this year’s conference there may be some who are sincere in their political convictions, and actually believe—either out of inexperience or naiveté—that the DSA is engaged in some sort of socialist project. But were they to speak out, forcefully and persistently, against the persecution of Assange, denounce the anti-Russia warmongering of the Democratic Party senators and congressional representatives, oppose the fixation on race and other forms of capitalist identity politics, or attempt to bring to the floor for discussion a resolution calling for the shutting down of the CIA, and the expropriation of capitalist industry, they would receive a rude lesson in “democratic socialism.” They would be shouted down and dragged out of the convention hall by the scruff of their necks.

The fight for socialism cannot be conducted on the basis of nationalist politics and under the banner of a capitalist party. The DSA is not an organization that is fighting for socialism, but, rather, one whose principal function is to suppress the development of that struggle.

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