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The Democratic Socialists of America Convention: A marketing gimmick for the Democratic Party

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) held its biannual convention from August 2 to August 4 in Atlanta, Georgia. The convention, organized by an ostensibly “socialist” organization, was in fact nothing more than a marketing gimmick for the Democratic Party and its right-wing politics.

The DSA is riven by factional conflicts over the distribution of money, the relative prioritization of national election campaigns versus local political operations and other tactical issues. The DSA-affiliated *Jacobin* magazine commented that the level of tension was so high prior to the convention that “many DSA members felt anxious about whether the organization would still exist once the weekend was over.”

The internal conflicts are bound up with the fact that the DSA has become a catch-all group for a broad range of organizations that orbit in and around the Democratic Party, including most recently the International Socialist Organization, which dissolved itself earlier this year. There are intense battles over who gets what. There are, however, no fundamental political differences over the basic orientation and function of the DSA.

What was most striking about the three-day event was the abysmally low level of discussion and the complacency that prevailed. There was no serious analysis of the political situation in the United States and internationally and no presentation of a political platform or program for the DSA itself. Indeed, earlier this year, the DSA’s leadership voted to postpone the development of a political platform, and the convention in August voted to consider such a platform for the next convention—in 2021.

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The opening remarks from National Organizer Maria Svart consisted of back-slapping and self-congratulations over the DSA's organizational and electoral gains, including the election of DSA members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib to the US Congress. Svart said nothing about the political circumstances within which the convention was being held—including the rise of far-right and fascistic movements throughout the world, the significance and character of the Trump administration, the danger of world war, the persecution of Julian Assange and the attack on democratic rights, or the growing struggles of the working class internationally.

The actual role of the Democratic Party as the political enablers of the Trump administration was, of course, not mentioned, nor was it the subject of discussion at any point during the convention.

The three days were devoted to reviewing dozens of resolutions submitted by the various factions. The most significant resolutions adopted related to how the DSA is developing its political relationships inside the Democratic Party. In particular, the strategy that prevailed was that supported by the Bread & Roses faction of the DSA, which is associated with *Jacobin* magazine (published by Bhaskar Sunkara).

Bread & Roses' "class-struggle elections" resolution calls for the endorsement of candidates (in the Democratic Party) who "openly identify as socialists." It states that the DSA "is committed to building political organization independent of the Democratic Party and their capitalist donors," which, however, "does not rule out DSA-endorsed candidates running tactically on the Democratic Party ballot line." An independent party will be necessary, but this will only happen at some point in the distant future.

Jacobin and Sunkara have christened this political fraud with an appropriately banal term, the "dirty break." The purpose is to try to maintain the political credibility of the DSA among young people who are disillusioned with the Democratic Party while at the same time directing them into the Democratic Party.

In fact, the DSA has no intention of breaking with the Democratic Party, in a dirty manner or otherwise. Indeed, the same resolution calls for "building a strong DSA for Bernie [Sanders'] campaign," and *Jacobin* magazine has largely transformed itself into a Sanders election journal.

Sanders' explicit purpose, as he has stated many times, is to encourage workers and young people to support the Democratic Party. He had the following to say **in April**:

Let's set the record straight. I am a member of the Democratic leadership of the United States Senate. I've been a member of the Democratic caucus in the Senate for the last 13 years and in the House for 16 years before that and won the Democratic nomination in my state. But in Vermont I have chosen to run as an independent, which goes way, way back.

...

[T]he truth is that more and more people are disenchanted with both the Republican and Democratic plank. And especially young people. They are registering as Independents, or not affiliated folks. And I think as somebody who was an Independent, we can bring them into the Democratic Party.

Sanders is a key element of the Democratic Party leadership, which for the past three years has worked to divert mass opposition to Donald Trump behind its right-wing, militarist agenda. The DSA's full-fledged support for Sanders—including three full-time positions dedicated to electoral work—is merely a rearguard effort to assist Sanders in this political operation.

A related resolution pledges that the DSA will not officially endorse another Democratic Party candidate other than Sanders, who it already endorsed earlier this year. This is politically meaningless, however. Sunkara himself said in May that in the event that Sanders loses in the primary, “the mentality has to be to call for people to vote for Joe Biden, especially in swing states” and “avoid a third-party candidate.”

A third resolution along the same lines calls for a petition to urge Sanders to adopt a “People's Foreign Policy Platform,” which will have no effect on Sanders' positions on anything. The most significant aspect of the resolution is that it says nothing about the Democratic Party's anti-Russia campaign or the trade war measures by the Trump administration against China, both of which Sanders supports. Nor does it mention ending the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan or stopping the regime-change operation in Syria, which the Democrats have spearheaded.

War and foreign policy were almost completely excluded from discussion throughout the three days, which helped avoid any unpleasant references to the fact that DSA members Ocasio-Cortez and Tlaib recently voted for a \$738 billion military budget.

Even in comparison to other political organizations that have served to direct opposition behind the Democratic Party, the DSA is characterized by its unabashed role as a booster of this bourgeois, capitalist party.

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The second category of resolutions related to the DSA's operations within and in support of the trade unions. The "rank-and-file strategy" supported by the Bread & Roses caucus again won out, though by a narrow minority. There were no significant differences between any of the resolutions, however, as all of them are premised on buttressing the trade unions, which have been instrumental in the suppression of the class struggle for decades.

The resolution affiliates the DSA with a strategy long promoted by Labor Notes, which is comprised of low-level union functionaries associated with "dissident" factions within the unions, such as the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). TDU founder Dan La Botz, a long-time member of Solidarity, is now a member of the DSA.

The "rank-and-file" strategy calls on members of the DSA to take up jobs in industries with unions and develop themselves as union officials and organizers, or to help establish affiliates of the existing trade unions where there are none.

Under the cover of "transforming the labor movement" and building an "organized working class," the role of the strategy is to expand the financial base for the corrupt, anti-working-class executives who control the unions, or to elevate members of the DSA into executive positions.

Among the featured speakers at the DSA convention was Sara Nelson, the president of the Association of Flight Attendants union (annual salary: \$164,000 a year). Nelson, a prominent backer of Hillary Clinton in 2016, has been floated as a contender to take over from Richard Trumka as the president of the AFL-CIO. Her speech consisted of an extended call for everyone there to "join unions, run unions."

The primary focus of the DSA and *Jacobin* has been on the struggles of teachers, where DSA is promoting the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), which includes the present leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). The CTU president is Jesse Sharkey, formerly a member of the now-dissolved ISO. In 2012, the CTU and the ISO were instrumental in shutting down the Chicago teachers strike on the basis of an agreement supported by then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel, which was quickly followed by the closure of dozens of schools.

Over the past year, the DSA has played an increasingly prominent role in assisting the unions in shutting down working-class opposition, particularly among teachers. In West Virginia, when teachers rebelled against the union and initiated a wildcat strike last fall, the DSA and *Jacobin* rushed in to reinflate the credibility of the West Virginia Teachers

Association. In January, the United Teachers Los Angeles, headed by a faction that is supported by the DSA, rammed through a sellout agreement crafted by leading state Democrats, giving teachers only a few hours to read the contract before forcing the vote.

No mention was made at the conference of the corruption scandal engulfing the United Auto Workers (UAW), which in the weeks since has reached to the very top of the organization, UAW President Gary Jones.

A word must be added in conclusion on the form of the convention, which was infused with identity politics. This aspect of the convention has become the focus of much of the media coverage of it, as it has been attacked by the right wing, which sees the absurdities involved as a good opportunity for denouncing socialism.

The adamant opposition to the use of the word “guys” and other “gendered language,” the objections to a man calling the question on a motion related to the abuse of sex workers, the requirement that every speaker provide the pronouns with which they would prefer to be identified, etc.—this is all reflective of a middle-class milieu in which everything revolves around race and gender.

Such politics is itself now an instrumental component of the politics of the Democratic Party. This has nothing to do with opposing the Trump administration, or for that matter fighting racism and other forms of inequality. It is, rather, an instrument for suppressing the basic class issues involved, dividing workers against each other, and developing a base within the upper-middle class for right-wing and militarist policies.

This is the basic function of the DSA. To the extent that there are workers or youth who are attracted to the organization in the mistaken belief that it has anything to do with socialism, its role is to turn them into either vote-getters for the Democratic Party or unpaid organizers for the trade union executives. In the process, the leaders of the DSA hope to leverage themselves into positions of power and privilege.

It is as far from socialism as the man in the moon.

30 August 2019