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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Eric London
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Democratic Socialists of America convention meets to promote Democratic Party

From August 1 to 8, 1,300 delegates of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) will meet online for the organization's biennial convention. The DSA presents itself as a growing left-wing movement whose aim is "to win a world organized and governed by and for the vast majority, the working class," according to a draft political platform to be discussed at the convention. It is a faction of the Democratic Party led by Democratic Party operatives to block opposition to the political establishment's march to the right.



Photo of the Democratic Socialists of America Conference in 2019. (Photo: Steve Eberhart, The Nation)

This is the first gathering of the DSA national delegates since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the 2020 election, the strikes and mass protests of 2020-21 and the

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January 6 putsch attempt by Donald Trump. Six months into the Biden administration, the Democratic Party has made clear that it is continuing the social policies of the Trump administration, lifting COVID-19 restrictions, echoing its efforts to scapegoat China for the pandemic, barring immigrants from entering the US, and undertaking no substantial expansion of social programs.

The DSA convention calendar and the draft platform either ignore these fundamental political questions or treat them as afterthoughts to the organization's efforts to integrate itself into the Democratic Party caucuses of various state legislatures and city councils.

The draft political platform does not include a single reference to Joe Biden or his administration and only a passing reference to the Democratic Party. It makes no criticism of the policies of the Democratic Party in the White House or Congress. There is no reference to "fascism," to Trump's efforts to overturn the results of the election, or to the events of January 6, as though the attempt by the president to carry out a coup attempt are of no real significance. The only reference to Donald Trump or the Trump administration is to track the growth of the DSA's numeric membership over the last four years.

The draft platform mentions the COVID-19 pandemic only briefly, saying the virus has "killed hundreds of thousands of people." In fact, the pandemic has killed well over 4 million worldwide, and likely over one million in the US, as measured by excess deaths. The draft platform makes no criticism of the policies of the capitalist class in response to the pandemic, which has been to sacrifice workers' lives for the sake of capitalist profit.

In contrast, the draft platform features various proposals for small electoral reforms, including changes to the Senate filibuster, adding more federal judges, term limits for Supreme Court justices, and passing various Democratic-sponsored bills on voting (bills which are languishing in the Democratic-controlled Senate). There are dozens of references to middle class identity politics, including 13 references to "gender" or "feminism," eight to "sex" and over 10 to "race," plus 11 to "black" and 12 to "white" skin colors.

The convention schedule includes four sessions to discuss tactics for running electoral campaigns in the Democratic Party, including one entitled "Using Elected Office to Build Socialism." There are three segments dedicated to religion, including "What Can

Religious Traditions Offer the Left,” one session teaching members how to fix car brake lights, and no sessions with titles referencing Trump, the Democratic Party, imperialism or war.

The DSA leadership cannot commit the organization’s platform to take any clear positions on fundamental political questions because doing so would expose the contradiction at the organization’s core: The DSA leadership aims to trap growing socialist sentiment within the capitalist, imperialist Democratic Party.

This political dynamic is confirmed by the role played by DSA and DSA-backed elected officials, which the organization promotes as proof of the success of its efforts to pressure the Democratic Party to the left. The draft platform cites the success of “Bernie Sanders’ two democratic socialist presidential campaigns” as well as “working-class electoral victories at all levels of government.”

The draft platform does not attempt to analyze the experience of the Sanders campaign because doing so would require acknowledging that Bernie Sanders’ campaigns did not result in any shift to the *left* in American bourgeois politics, but to the right. Sanders won the votes of nearly 10 million people in the 2020 Democratic Party primary only to drop out of the race to endorse Biden in April. His campaign did not result in a “political revolution” but in Sanders’ accession to the chairmanship of the Senate committee overseeing the capitalist state’s budget!

In the 2020 general election, Sanders, New York Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (a DSA member) and a majority of the DSA leadership campaigned actively for the right-wing Biden, a representative of the banks, the military, the credit card companies and the prison-industrial complex. The corporate press is now fawning over Sanders’ deepening efforts to prop up the Biden administration, praising his turn to what they call a “pragmatic” approach.

This week, Sanders helped force a conservative infrastructure package through the Senate with Republican support. After voting for the CARES Act—a multitrillion-dollar corporate giveaway—in March 2020, Sanders now blocks calls to spend trillions on a jobs program or on social programs to address poverty and inequality. Former Barack Obama senior advisor David Axelrod told *Politico* that Sanders has become “pragmatic in a

principled way.” *Politico* reported that when asked whether Sanders has become more conservative, moderate Democratic Senator Brian Schatz “offered a clipped ‘yes’ for an answer: ‘I don’t want to get him in trouble.’”

The Associated Press also reported Wednesday that Sanders’ political organization, “Our Revolution,” “is undergoing a rebranding... Rather than insisting on ‘Medicare for All’—Sanders’ trademark universal, government-funded health care plan—or the climate-change-fighting Green New Deal, Our Revolution is focusing on the more modest alternatives endorsed by President Joe Biden.”

The “Squad” of DSA members in Congress have played the same role. New York Democrats and DSA members Jamaal Bowman and Ocasio-Cortez met with conservative New York City Democratic mayoral nominee Eric Adams (a former police officer) last week. Bowman, speaking next to Ocasio-Cortez, said it was “a good meeting,” adding, “It’s not about ideology or party, all that nonsense. We ain’t talking about that.”

As the DSA leaders rain praise on the right wing of the Democratic Party, the right responds by making clear that it will make no concessions to the DSA on policy. Eric Adams and Biden both recently denounced socialism, with Biden saying, “Communism is a failed system, a universally failed system. And I don’t see socialism as a very useful substitute, but that’s another story.” While denouncing the left wing of his own party, Biden calls for promoting the Republicans. “We need a Republican Party,” he said days after the Republicans backed Trump’s January coup attempt. “We need an opposition that’s principled and strong.”

The DSA convention also aims to promote the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, and the speaker lineup features DSA member and flight attendants’ union president Sara Nelson. The DSA and Democratic Party are distinctly aware of the growing rebellion among workers against the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and present the trade unions as merely the victim of “union busting,” rather than accomplices in a half century of betrayals of the working class. The draft platform presents the teachers’ wildcat strike wave of 2018 as a “union reform movement,” not a rebellion of the rank and file against the union bureaucracies. The draft platform resolves to expand the control of the AFL-CIO over the working class, particularly through the promotion of the PRO Act.

Meanwhile, the DSA and its associated publications, including *Jacobin* magazine, maintained a complete silence on the strike by Volvo workers in Dublin, Virginia, which developed as a rebellion of rank-and-file workers against the betrayal carried out by the United Auto Workers.

The convention takes place as the DSA is itself racked by internal crisis. Its leadership, comprised of people like former Democratic National Committee staffer David Duhalde, is increasingly seen as antagonistic to those in the rank and file who are genuinely interested in socialism and a break with the Democratic Party.

Thousands of DSA members responded in anger when Ocasio-Cortez told DSA's *Democratic Left* magazine in March that the Biden administration and incumbent Democrats were "totally reinvent[ing] themselves in a far more progressive direction" and that pressure from below has caused "almost a radical change" among the Democratic leadership. Ocasio-Cortez attacked socialist opponents of the Biden administration as "bad faith actors" who are "privileged" and racist. Tapping into the anticommunist, Shachtmanite roots of the DSA and its founder, Michael Harrington, Ocasio-Cortez denounced "class essentialists" saying they "deprioritize human rights."

When the *World Socialist Web Site* exposed Ocasio-Cortez's interview in an article that was read by over 100,000 people, including thousands of DSA members, a section of the DSA leadership initiated a campaign to celebrate the Stalinist assassination of Leon Trotsky and downplay the crimes of Stalinism. On May 22, WSWS International Editorial Board Chairperson David North wrote an [open letter](#) to DSA Political Director Maria Svart demanding the organization take action against those responsible, but Svart refused to respond to the letter. Several DSA branches stonewalled requests by members for democratic discussion on the matter.

Amid mass death, the explosive growth of the class struggle, the increasingly urgent climate crisis and the danger of war and fascism, the DSA plays a central role in the farcical dynamic of capitalist politics. The DSA props up the Democratic Party—a 200-year-old institution of world imperialist reaction—which in turn props up the Republicans as a necessary source of social stability. The Republicans then rely increasingly on Trump as the embodiment of "law and order" and the guardian of corporate profits. As a result,

the entire political establishment lurches further to the right, taking the DSA with it. To revolutionaries, the DSA is an example of everything socialism is *not*.

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