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Top Democrats, union bureaucrats defeat DSA-backed candidate India Walton, winner of Democratic primary, in Buffalo mayoral election



Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown speaks to supporters at his election night party, late Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021, in Buffalo, N.Y. (AP Photo/Jeffrey T. Barnes)

On Wednesday, India Walton, the Democratic Socialists of America-affiliated candidate for mayor of Buffalo, New York conceded Tuesday's election to the incumbent mayor, Byron Brown, who has already served four terms.

Brown waged a union-backed write-in campaign after losing to Walton in the city's Democratic primary election in June. Top Democrats, including Governor Kathy Hochul, who replaced Andrew Cuomo in August following a trumped-up #MeToo-style sex scandal, refused to support Walton and thereby gave her blessing to the right-wing write-in campaign of Brown.

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In her concession statement, Walton avoided denouncing the Democratic Party in general or naming those who sabotaged her campaign, instead concentrating her fire on the Republican Party leadership and referring merely to the “many high-profile Democrats” who “refused to defend us against them.”

With all precincts reporting, just over 41 percent of votes cast were for Walton and 59 percent were marked for “write-in,” or 23,986 to 34,273. The vast majority of votes in the “write-in” category are assumed to be for Brown, who declared victory on Tuesday night. Mail-in ballots will not be counted until November 9, but Brown’s nearly 10,000 vote lead cannot be overcome by those results.

No Republican contested the mayoral race in the heavily working class city of 254,000 people. Buffalo, in western New York State, is among those “rust belt” cities devastated by decades of deindustrialization. The former center of steel production and other manufacturing had a population of 580,000 in 1950. It is now one of the poorest US cities, with an official poverty rate of over 30 percent.

The election took place during the fifth week of a bitter strike by 2,200 nurses and health workers against Mercy Hospital in Buffalo. The workers are fighting against massive understaffing and forced overtime as well as low pay.

Democratic politicians have appeared on the picket lines, including Walton, not to advance the fight of the workers, but to bolster the bureaucracy of the Communications Workers of America, which officially “represents” the nurses and health workers, but, in fact, is isolating them from their fellow Catholic Health system workers and nurses on strike at Saint Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts.

After losing the primary, Brown ran a right-wing, anti-communist campaign against Walton, digging up unflattering personal details from her past and suggesting that the election of a “socialist” would destroy the city.

Brown celebrated his reelection Tuesday night at his campaign headquarters and suggested that Walton was a threat to democracy, stating, “Today’s election was not just a referendum on the city of Buffalo. It was a referendum on the future of our democracy.”

While New York senators Kirstin Gillibrand and Charles Schumer, known as “the senator from Wall Street,” formally supported Walton, both Hochul and the New York State Democratic Committee refused to back Walton. Hochul hails from Buffalo and is highly influential within the local Democratic Party.

Jay S. Jacobs, the chairman of the New York State Democratic Committee, justified his refusal to back the winner of the party’s primary election by comparing her to former KKK leader David Duke.

After arrogantly declaring that there was no requirement for the party leadership to support the primary winner, he said: “Let’s take a scenario, very different, where David Duke, you remember him? The grand wizard of the KKK? He moves to New York, he becomes a Democrat, and he runs for mayor in the city of Rochester, which has a low primary turnout, and he wins the Democratic line. I have to endorse David Duke? I don’t think so.”

While Brown received the backing of New York’s Democratic establishment, he was also able to count on the backing of the state’s union bureaucracies.

In a region where union membership, though only a fraction of what it once was, is still twice the national average, the Western New York Area Labor Federation/AFL-CIO, AFSCME Council 35, the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA), the Transport Workers Union, the Buffalo Professional Firefighters and the Buffalo Police Benevolent Association all backed Brown, demonstrating that the unions themselves are nothing more than extensions of the Democratic Party.

Walton had gained the support of the Buffalo Teachers Federation, SEIU Local 1199 and the Working Families Party (WFP). She later alienated both teachers and the Buffalo Teachers Federation when she expressed support for charter schools while speaking at a Rotary Club luncheon.

Despite her self-proclaimed “socialist” politics, Walton revealed herself to be a conventional reformist Democrat with little knowledge of socialism or its history.

During the same luncheon with the Rotary Club, Walton stated that she would fight poverty by creating “good, minimum-wage, green jobs.”

In Walton's own political program as posted on her website, there is no mention of either capitalism or socialism. Reading her program, one would have no idea that the problems of Buffalo—extreme poverty, low wages, a poor education system, police violence and political corruption—are endemic across capitalist America and the entire world.

Instead, her program is filled with typical left-liberal capitalist reform policies, such as prioritizing “small and minority-owned local businesses” and targeting “infrastructure investments to create safe streets, calming traffic and increasing accessibility for people of all ages and abilities.”

Throughout her campaign, Walton relied on empty reformist platitudes while touting the endorsement of figures such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Ocasio-Cortez, who visited Buffalo to support Walton a week before the election, told television station WIVB that both Walton and she dreaded the “socialist” label. She elaborated: “When you talk about capitalism, socialism, et cetera—these are very high-minded debates. I think what's important is we say, ‘Where's the beef?’ What are the policies each candidate is actually proposing?”

As the failure of Walton's campaign

and the collapse of Biden's social reform bill demonstrate, the Democrats cannot be reformed, nor can the capitalist system. Workers and youth must reject the DSA's attempted rebranding of the United States' oldest capitalist party and fight to build a mass socialist movement to overthrow capitalism.

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