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## *The resignation of Maria Svart and the political crisis in the Democratic Socialists of America*



Protesters hold a DSA banner during a march for voting rights, marking the 58th anniversary of the March on Washington, Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021. Jose [AP Photo/Luis Magana]

Last month, Maria Svart, the national director of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), published a statement announcing her resignation from the position. Svart's decision to step down from the top post in the DSA, one she has held for over 12 years, is one of many indications of a major political crisis within the organization.

In her statement ("A Farewell from the National Director"), Svart stated that "hundreds of members join each month, but more members leave or let their dues lapse," producing what she referred to as "a period of membership shrinkage and increasing financial stress."

While Svart did not give figures on recent membership, according to Socialist Majority, a caucus within the DSA, it has fallen by 30 percent in the last two years.

“On our present course, we will be unable to pay all our bills in a few months without a change in direction,” Svart wrote. With regard to the organization’s 2024 budget, she continued, “It will require very hard choices, and longer term, a reckoning with our structure and our definition of democracy.” The organization has racked up a \$1.7 million budget deficit that it does not have the funds to pay off.

Various factions and caucuses within the DSA have published statements over the past month presenting their solutions to the financial deficit through cuts and other actions. What is notably absent, however, is any attempt to explain the organization’s crisis politically. This applies in particular to Svart’s own letter, which is devoid of any concrete reference to the political situation. It does not refer to the emerging global war, which began in 2022 over Ukraine and has now extended to the Middle East, the pandemic which has claimed almost 30 million lives since 2020, the elevation of fascistic tendencies and the political crisis in the United States, or the growth of class struggle throughout the world.

The genocide in Gaza is cited only in relation to Svart’s decision to delay her departure by two months in order not “to disrupt our critical Palestine solidarity work,” which has consisted of organizing “almost 400,000 calls to Congress”—that is, appeals to the same Democrats and Republicans that fund and arm the Israeli regime in its onslaught on the Palestinian people. Svart refers to Biden only once, and only to remark that in the wake of his election, “there was a worldwide slowdown in donation income and volunteer engagement at nonprofits and other civic organizations,” which is her only effort to explain the decline in DSA’s membership.

The crisis in the DSA is one expression of the crisis of the Democratic Party under conditions of an emerging world war, a sharp shift to the right by the entire ruling class and growing popular opposition. The coming to power of the Biden administration is significant in relation to the DSA not because it produced a decline in “volunteer engagement,” but because it has exposed the reactionary character of the Democratic Party and with it the DSA.

In reviewing the political work of the DSA since she became national director, Svart lauds the various campaigns to support Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other Democratic Party politicians.

“The DSA endorsed Bernie Sanders for president in his first presidential run and we began to grow,” she writes. With the election of DSA member Ocasio-Cortez to Congress in 2018, Svart states, the DSA grew further. “It was our largest new member month in history.” This was followed by the second campaign of Sanders for president. “Tens of thousands of Bernie supporters found us, and DSA was invited to the People Power for Bernie coalition with base-building national organizations.”

In fact, the DSA and figures like Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez were built up systematically by sections of the Democratic Party, the media and the state apparatus as “state socialists”: their function was and is to trap young people and workers moving to the left, and keep them within the framework of capitalist politics, above all the Democratic Party.

But with these very campaigns, the DSA has now discredited itself in the eyes of left-wing workers and youth. Both Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez have provided political cover for Biden as he backs the Israeli genocide in Gaza. Not only have they both endorsed Biden in the 2024 election, but they attack any criticism of the Democratic Party from the left. Ocasio-Cortez has called socialist opponents of Biden “privileged” and “bad faith actors.” In a recent interview, when asked about her support for Biden as he funds genocide, she said, “We just got to be adults about the situation.”

The DSA in Los Angeles, meanwhile, has been thrown into crisis over its endorsement of Los Angeles Council member Nithya Raman, a DSA member who has received the support of Zionist organizations along with the Democratic Party establishment.

The DSA has also played a central role in the Democratic Party’s strategy to bolster the union bureaucracies to suppress working class opposition to austerity and imperialist war. Toward the beginning of her letter, Svart writes, “Outside of unions, there are too few places where working class people can decide together the direction of our lives and fight for it rather than sit at home alone while the whole world burns and the authoritarians rise.” She writes later of the DSA’s role in supporting the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Teamsters.

When Svart speaks of the “unions,” she means not the rank-and-file workers, but the bureaucracies, in which the DSA has secured high positions for itself. In both the Teamsters and the UAW, DSA members have been elevated into the upper echelons of the apparatus—led by Sean O’Brien in the former and Shawn Fain in the latter. During the UAW election in 2022, the DSA supported the long-time bureaucrat Fain against rank-and-file socialist Will Lehman, while covering up the systematic campaign of the apparatus to suppress the vote. It then proceeded to sell Fain’s phony “stand-up strike” last

year, which involved calling out only a tiny fraction of the membership, as a historic advance.

With the DSA's assistance, both the Teamsters and the UAW have implemented pro-corporate contracts, working with the Biden administration to suppress the class struggle and subordinate it to the ruling class policy of war abroad. In the first month of 2024, the auto companies and UPS have begun implementing mass layoffs, facilitated by the trade union apparatus.

Fain has also endorsed Biden for reelection, despite a toothless resolution promoted by the DSA nominally calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. At the recent UAW event where Biden accepted the union's endorsement, several pro-Palestinian UAW members were forcibly thrown out of the meeting for protesting against the genocide, while Fain pledged to Biden backstage, "Mr. President, it's time for us to go to war and put the power of the membership behind you. I'm looking forward to it. And we're going to do it." O'Brien, meanwhile, is contemplating endorsing Trump.

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Since its founding in 1982 by Michael Harrington, the DSA has served as a faction of the Democratic Party. Under Svart, however, it has increasingly been brought into positions within the state apparatus. In the process, it has become a broad catchment for various reactionary middle-class formations, including outright Stalinists, whose main common denominator is hostility toward the working class and revolutionary internationalism.

This found its most overt expression in the campaign of threats of political violence and assassination against Trotskyists by leading YDSA and DSA members in 2021, involving the posting of ice pick images, a reference to and an endorsement of the assassination of Leon Trotsky by a Stalinist agent in 1940. David North, National Chairman of the Socialist Equality Party, responded by writing an open letter to Svart in 2021, demanding that the DSA repudiate the violent threats, to which she never responded, thus endorsing the attacks.

All of this underlies the crisis within the DSA. The decline in membership certainly expresses the fact that many of those who joined or sympathized with the DSA have

become disillusioned in the organization and its adamant support for the Democratic Party. At the same time, the DSA is also riven by increasing factional conflicts by the various middle class tendencies that have joined and promoted it.

Moreover, while the DSA endlessly promotes the Democratic Party, sections of the Democratic Party are not necessarily keen on utilizing its services.

Shortly after Svart announced her resignation, the *New York Times* reported that an organization set up by the DSA to elect Democrats, “DSA for the Many,” has been targeted by the State Board of Elections in New York for alleged campaign violations and could face \$300,000 in fines—seven times the organization’s cash reserves—on top of their budget crisis. The *New York Times* hinted that there was a connection between this apparent attempt by sections of the Democratic Party to ruin the DSA and the backlash over the New York DSA’s initial and timid support for a Gaza protest last October.

To what extent these different elements of the crisis within the DSA motivated Svart’s resignation is not known. She also may simply be looking to move on to a better position within the Democratic Party itself. In any case, young people and workers attracted to the DSA need to draw the necessary conclusions from the experience of the past decade.

The DSA is not a socialist organization. It is a faction of the Democratic Party. It represents the interests of privileged layers of the upper middle class, not the working class. As with all organizations of the upper middle class, it is thoroughly nationalist, supporting American imperialism while promoting the politics of racial and gender identity.

For those that mistakenly joined or oriented to the DSA believing it presented an alternative to capitalism and are now leaving the organization seeking genuine socialist politics, the next step must be a total break with all the politics of the middle class and a turn towards genuine Marxism, presented by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party.

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