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Book review

US: DSA and the Democratic Party

- Reviews section -

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The past six years have seen the greatest expansion of the US socialist movement in almost eight decades. Surprisingly to many, the expansion has come through an organisation that had long seemed stagnant, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Bernie Sanders' groundbreaking campaign in 2016 for the Democratic presidential nomination inspired thousands of young, newly radicalised people to look for a socialist organisation to join, and the DSA was what they found. From a few thousand barely active members the group has mushroomed to about 95,000 today, as its average age has plummeted.

As the DSA grew and was rejuvenated, its politics were in many ways transformed. In a wave of shocks to its social democratic old guard, its 2017 convention endorsed reparations for African Americans, and boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel. While the DSA had traditionally cherished its ties to left-leaning trade union officials committed to business unionism, the 2017 convention voted by a narrow majority for a rank-and-file orientation in the labour movement, inspired in part by veterans of the paper *Labor Notes* with roots in the anti-Stalinist revolutionary left. Also symbolically important was the convention's decision to break the DSA's ties to the Socialist and Labour (Second) International.

In electoral politics, the new DSA kept the traditional orientation of its long-time leader Michael Harrington to the Democratic Party, but shifted its tactics. Harrington (in continuity with the DSA's predecessor organisation DSOC [\[1\]](#)) had supported left-liberal Democrats like George McGovern and Ted Kennedy, even keeping a certain distance from Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition. The new DSA emphasised supporting Democratic primary campaigns by DSA members and other democratic socialists. A key early success for this tactic was the upset primary victory and subsequent election in 2018 of Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez as Congressperson from New York. Today, due largely to the DSA's work, there are more self-declared socialists in the US Congress than ever before in US history.

But ...

However, socialists elected to Congress a century ago, like Meyer London from New York and Victor Berger from Milwaukee (though staunch reformists), had represented the mass Socialist Party (about as big at that time as the DSA today, in a country that then had about one-third the population of the US now). The DSA members and DSA-backed politicians in Congress today, as well as the growing ranks of DSAers in state legislatures and city councils, are by contrast almost all members of Democratic Party caucuses. As Kim Moody's solidly researched and argued book *Breaking the Impasse* shows, this difference has major, even decisive consequences.

The 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns by Bernie Sanders (not a DSA member, and in fact officially still not a Democrat) focused on demands that challenged neoliberal politics-as-usual head-on. Sanders' demands included Medicare for All: a programme that would give health insurance to tens of millions of people in the US who still have none. Medicare for All would also sideline the insurance companies that dominate US healthcare today, and rein in the powerful, immensely profitable pharmaceutical companies that charge many more times in the US for drugs than in other countries. Sanders also campaigned for a Green New Deal, which would have vigorously combated global warming while reshaping the US economy in the interests of environmental and social justice. [\[2\]](#)

Unsurprisingly, the DSA too backs Medicare for All and the Green New Deal. But as Moody shows, DSA-backed Congresspeople's Democratic caucus membership hamstring their ability to energetically push for these proposals. Immediately after taking office early in 2019, Ocasio-Cortez and her handful of allies in 'the Squad' decided to back

Nancy Pelosi for re-election as Speaker of the House of Representatives in return for positions on congressional committees. They have followed up this initial act of subservience by only occasionally rebelling against Democratic leadership decisions, mostly voting in lockstep party discipline.

This means going along with the centrist, neoliberal priorities of Pelosi, Senate majority leader Charles Schumer, other top Democratic leaders and President Biden. As a result, Medicare for All and the Green New Deal have never even been brought to the floor of the House or Senate for a vote. Moody explains in detail the maneuvers Pelosi used keep the Green New Deal bottled up from 2019 on: among other things, she assigned the bill to 11 different standing committees, 'where it could be torn to pieces, amended beyond recognition, delayed indefinitely, buried, etc.' (109). Sanders and the socialists in the House have contented themselves with nudging Biden's proposals a bit to the left here and there. Since their votes can be taken for granted, though, they have been far less successful in extracting concessions than the most right-wing Democrats, like West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin.

DSA-backed Congresspeople may argue that proposals like Medicare for All and the Green New Deal have zero chance of being adopted in the current relationship of forces anyway, so it makes more sense to focus on goals that are actually winnable. The assessment is correct, but the conclusion flies in the face of a century and more of political experience.

The way to change the relationship of forces is to fight visibly for demands around which millions of people can mobilise. This means that socialists who are elected to hostile parliamentary bodies need to focus, not on proposals with a chance to win a parliamentary majority, but on proposals that will help mobilise people on the streets. This is not even a serious discussion in the DSA. DSA-backed elected officials are not accountable to the organisation, and rarely participate in its debates over strategy and tactics.

Consequently, candidates' campaigns for Medicare for All and the Green New Deal are not accompanied by grassroots, extraparliamentary movements. There are no real mass movements around these issues. Although many DSA members are hardworking activists, for example in key trade union struggles, the organisation focuses largely on elections.

The limits of this focus became manifest when millions of people hit the streets for Black Lives Matter in 2020 following the police murder of George Floyd. Not only was the DSA caught by surprise - as almost everyone was - but making the transition to coordinated participation in a radical street-based movement seemed to be beyond its capacity. Radical DSA demands for reparations to African-Americans and for BDS have also barely been translated into action. In fact, the organisation's National Political Committee dechartered its BDS and Palestine Working Group for criticising DSA Congressman Jamaal Bowman's pro-Israel positions. [3] Moves like this risk, in Moody's words, 'a step backward to DSA's social democratic past and the legacy that still haunts it' (173).

The rationale

The current DSA majority agrees in principle that extraparliamentary movements are key, and that even in the electoral arena the Democratic Party can never be won for socialism. They therefore reject the 'realignment strategy' for moving the Democratic Party to the left, which largely guided the group's electoral work before 2016. Instead the DSA's prevailing tendencies today argue for a protracted, 'dirty break' with the Democratic Party, or in some cases for building a 'surrogate party' within it. Among the great merits of Moody's book is his strong, insightful arguments against these tactics.

For one thing, Moody shows, the DSA leadership's diagnosis of the problem is wrong. They generally argue that a

US electoral system based on first-past-the-post elections in single-member districts makes a breakthrough for a socialist or labour party extremely difficult. Moody points out that the British Labour Party (in the early 20th century) and the Canadian New Democratic Party (a half-century ago) faced and overcame these same obstacles.

Not the electoral system, but Progressive era 'reforms' in the first decades of the last century disenfranchised US working-class voters, leading to exceptionally low working-class voter turnout and largely eliminating the electoral base for a working-class party. Not a 'dirty break' but only a militant, extraparliamentary, class-based movement could clear away this obstacle. Writing as the US labor movement's foremost radical historian and strategist for the past generation, Moody concludes that 'a rank-and-file orientation to socialist union work is essential' to secure 'the independence of the unions from capital and ... from the union leadership's dependence on the Democratic Party' (25).

In the absence of an independent labour movement, the Democratic Party has moved further and further to the right since the 1970s, not only politically but structurally. Moody sets out in detail the many ways in which neoliberal forces subservient to capital have cemented their hold over the party.

With no grassroots membership and thus no accountable leadership, the Democratic Party has instead increasingly become a creature of its fundraising committees and the nonpartisan 'Super PACS' that channel money from corporations and the rich to their favoured Democratic candidates. This structure makes it extremely difficult - and rare - to defeat incumbents in Democratic primaries.

The party structure also more or less deliberately drives away the working-class voters that were a big proportion of the party's base from the 1930s to the 1960s. Today, Moody shows, the Democratic Party is increasingly the favoured party of highly-educated, petty-bourgeois and bourgeois layers. Meanwhile, people earning \$50,000 or less who favoured Democrats dropped from 48 per cent of voters in 2016 to 35 per cent in 2020 (35). As a percentage of Democratic voters, union household voters fell from 32 per cent in 2000 to 21 per cent in 2020. (69) Blacks and Latinxs are also a steadily smaller proportion of Democratic voters. (82-83)

The pretty much undermines the whole rationale of the DSA 'dirty break' and 'surrogate party' tactics. Postponing a break with the Democratic Party until a strong base has been built within it means postponing the break forever, because the party's whole structure is geared towards ensuring that the progressive wing remains weak and captive. And any attempt to build a left-wing 'surrogate party' within the Democratic Party is constantly undermined by the powerful gravitational pull of money and discipline on even the most progressive Democratic office holders. Given the vastly greater resources in the hands of Democratic Party leaders and their ruling-class backers, Moody concludes, 'The imbalance is enormous.' (53)

Rustin

Moody illustrates the futility of working in the Democratic Party by telling the story of a favourite historical figure of the DSA's current strategists, civil rights and labour organiser Bayard Rustin. A charismatic, eloquent, gay Black leader and the central organiser of the 1963 March on Washington, Rustin is today an icon for many on the left. His 1965 article 'From Protest to Politics' is a virtual bible today for leftists advocating work in the Democratic Party.

Yet as as Moody notes, the article reflected an evolution in which 'by the 1960s [Rustin] tragically moved even farther toward the right of social democracy than Harrington'.(3) [4] Moody, remembering his own activist history beginning in the early 1960s, points out that the successful Black political strategy followed from 1941 to 1963, and put into practice by Rustin and his mentor A. Philip Randolph, was based on a far more independent and militant approach

than the one Rustin advocated in his 1965 article.

Moody concludes that in the 1960s and 1970s 'the civil rights movement inspired rank-and-file rebellion on the "old" unions, the rise of public employee unionism, the women's and gay liberation movements, and so on'. Learning the lessons of those years means 'to take both class and race seriously and to understand that power derives from the independent organization and actions of the exploited and oppressed themselves'. (107)

What about Trump?

Unfortunately, this is not the predominant approach of US socialists today. Instead, socialists are trapped in the role of a caboose to liberal and centrist Democrats in their fight with a ferociously right-wing Republican Party. Moody rightly characterises the US political situation today as one of 'polarization and impasse', 'rooted in deep divisions within the capitalist class as it faces its own crises', leading to what Mike Davis has called 'political "trench warfare" and stalemate'.(6)

A key reality bedeviling the new DSA has of course been the rise, presidency and continued political strength of Donald Trump. More than any arguments about 'dirty break' tactics, fear of Trump and Trumpism has probably been the single most compelling factor in keeping young radical DSAers voting and working for Democrats.

The argument for a break with the Democratic Party needs to be part of an argument that independent politics is vital to an effective fight against the far right. Moody argues, rightly, that defeating 'the organized mass far right ... calls for a level of grassroots organizations and even self-defense that is not compatible with conventional, digitalized campaigning' (175). Expanding and deepening this line of argument might have strengthened the appeal of *Breaking the Impasse* to young DSAers.

Yet even in the current extraordinary difficult situation, the extreme polarisation of US politics today has in some ways created openings for independent left-wing politics, even in the electoral arena. As Moody points out, even before Sanders' 2016 presidential run, Gallup polls in 2010 and 2012 showed high and rising popular support in the US for socialism. (57)

And in many areas the argument against left-wing 'spoiler' candidates against Democrats who could risk electing Republicans is weak. Many US congressional districts are in effect 'one-party states'. In 39 Democratic-dominated congressional districts in 2020, there was no Republican candidate at all. In another 60, Republicans won less than a third of the vote. (33) In these districts, a left party could potentially replace the Republicans as the major opposition force. In the city of San Francisco, there have been times in recent years where the Greens did in fact supplant the Republicans as the main opposition party.

'If there is to be a new working class-based political party of the left in the US,' Moody cautions, 'it will have to be much more than an electoral organization.' The course of 'the new radical parties in Europe such as Podemos' shows 'that focusing mainly on elections ... leads to setbacks or defeat'. (168-69) In the long or even middle term, Moody's case is compelling. The weak presence in movements of a third party like the US Greens makes it a poor foundation for the party the left needs.

Moody may however somewhat underestimate the relative autonomy of politics, which can make even electoralist left forces useful for brief periods to a limited degree. In that sense, the weak support on the US left for Howie Hawkins' Green presidential candidacy in 2020, which put forward a range of well-argued ecosocialist positions, may be seen

as a missed opportunity. [5]

Quibbles apart, *Breaking the Impasse* is a treasurehouse of evidence and analysis demonstrating the urgent necessity of a new, independent course for the US socialist movement, by a brilliant thinker with 60 years of study and activist experience to draw on. It deserves the widest possible audience.

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[1] Full disclosure: I began my life on the left in the New Left organisation New American Movement (NAM), and opposed NAM's 1982 fusion with DSOC to form the DSA.

[2] There are different versions of the Green New Deal. Green Party presidential candidate Howie Hawkins campaigned in 2020 for a Green New Deal that would have challenged capitalism more radically than Sanders' version.

[3] For details of this dispute, see Andy Sernatinger, 'To Rule an Empty Palace: The BDS Dispute in DSA', *Tempest*, 3 April 2022, <https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/04/to-rule-an-empty-palace/>.

[4] For a discussion of Rustin's rightward evolution, see my review of John D'Emilio's biography: Peter Drucker, 'The Prophet Gone Astray', *Against the Current* 114, Jan.-Feb. 2005, <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc114/p341/>.

[5] I made this argument in 'Left Politics after Sanders: Think Internationally, Historically and Dialectically', *New Politics* (online), 27 April 2020, <https://newpol.org/left-politics-after-sanders-think-internationally-historically-and-dialectically/>.