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USA

# Defining Democratic Socialists of America

- Reviews section -



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*A User's Guide to DSA:*

*5 Debates That Define the Democratic Socialists*

edited by Stephan Kimmerle, Philip Locker, and Brandon Madsen

Seattle, WA: Labor Power Publications, 2025, 459 pages. Hardback: \$25; paperback: \$15; e-book: \$9.50. See [www.labor-power.org](http://www.labor-power.org)

THIS VALUABLE COLLECTION serves a dual function. Most obviously, it connects readers with the largest organization on the U.S. Left today — Democratic Socialists of America.

DSA membership has skyrocketed from a few thousand mostly aging and inactive old-timers to 100,000 mainly new socialist adherents. (It has been estimated that only 10% of today's DSA members are active — which would make the number of DSA activists “only” about 10,000 — significantly larger than any other socialist or communist group in the United States.)

These adherents and activists are mostly young. They have been energized not only by the intensifying social, economic, political and environmental crises of the past couple of decades (more on this below), but also the phenomenal impact of open, self-identified socialists in the electoral arena, from Bernie Sanders to the congressional left-of-center “squad” headed by the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Rashida Tlaib, and the remarkable 2025 mayoral victory of Zohran Mamdani in New York City.

The second function of this volume is to draw readers into a series of discussions and debates among committed DSA members, through which Marxist theory is being connected to politically serious, outward-reaching activism in the United States.

These are not critiques from the sidelines, but contending reports and proposed battle-plans from those laboring for a transition to socialism in the near future.

The book's 38 articles represent a broad range of opinion within DSA — mostly from members of the more than 13 political caucuses currently influencing the organization's thinking and policies.

It should be added that the great majority of DSA members belong to no caucus, and a few authors in this volume (including myself) are non-caucus members.

## Building a Socialist Alternative

Groundwork, a substantial component of DSA's moderate wing, offers this useful listing of “five key interlocking crises in capitalism” (316):

- First, the existential threat to human civilization posed by the climate crisis.
- Second, the advancing threat posed by the far right to multiracial democracy.

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- Third, the continuing threat of U.S. imperialism to world peace and the global South's laboring classes.
- Fourth, standards of living in the United States are in precipitous decline, causing social and economic instability and the possibility of real political realignment.
- Fifth, attacks on women's bodily autonomy and the rights of gender and sexual minorities have continued to oppress working people in the United States and the world at large.

Groundwork member Ashik Siddique is a co-chair of DSA. The other co-chair is Megan Romer, from the far-left Red Star caucus. She stresses the interlocking aspects of the various issues. "We view them from a socialist perspective and see that none of them stand alone," she notes.

Immigration is not separate from labor justice, which is not separate from environmental justice, which is not separate from housing rights. They are connected because all of them are symptoms of capitalism. (24)

From a different point on the DSA political spectrum, Reform and Revolution caucus member Philip Locker, an editor of this volume, offers a key definition of socialism that emphasizes its grounding in Marxist essentials:

"Understanding the centrality of the working class is at the core of the revolutionary socialist tradition. It was on this basis that Marx argued for the revolutionary idea that socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class. This profoundly democratic idea is the beating heart of authentic Marxism." (304).

This is "profoundly democratic" because of how Locker understands the U.S. working class:

The working class, the majority of the U.S. population, is compelled to sell its labor for a wage to survive. This includes teachers, nurses, baristas, tech workers, service workers, construction workers, manufacturing workers, public sector workers, workers at non-profits, etc. It includes both low-paid workers and high-paid workers (who are paid well because they have built strong unions or due to their skills being in high demand for a time). The working class includes blue and white collar workers, manual and intellectual labor, highly skilled and less skilled labor.

He adds: "The working class also includes the family and dependents of wage-earners, such as children, retired workers, and stay-at-home parents in working-class families who work to raise the next generation of workers or to care for the elderly." More than this, Locker notes, "women are part of the paid workforce more than ever," and "the working class is disproportionately made up of people of color." (303).

Most DSA members agree with these points from the members of Groundwork, Red Star, and Reform and Revolution. But the organization struggles over what to do about it all. "Our Tasks and Perspectives," a key Groundwork document reproduced in this book, puts the matter starkly:

One may say that the fundamental tool of Marxist analysis is class, and in the final analysis our goal may be a classless society, but if our organizing does not meet people where they are — in their own experience of their oppression, which includes factors beyond class per se — we can hardly hope to unite the class. To put it simply: we cannot win the class struggle without winning all of our other struggles.

While this also seems to be accepted by most, it is a tall order. A User's Guide to DSA is designed to help advance the process of sorting this out. Most of the contributions are grouped into five defining debates: 1. How to Fight Trump and Defend Working-Class and Oppressed People; 2. Electoral Strategy and the Democratic Party; 3. Labor Organizing and the Role of Socialists in the Workers' Movement; 4. How to Change the World; 5. What Is Socialist Internationalism.

# Origins and Development

In considering the future of DSA, we should recall its past.

"Historically speaking, there are fundamentally two DSAs: pre-Bernie DSA (1982-2014) and post-Bernie DSA (2015-present)," writes Laura Wadlin, a leader of the influential left-wing caucus Bread and Roses in her useful essay "A Political History of DSA, 1982-2025."

Wadlin points out that "only a tiny portion of DSA members were organized socialists before the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign revitalized the idea of 'democratic socialism' in 2015," adding that "many active members now only became socialists in the last few years or months." (48)

DSA emerged under the tutelage of Michael Harrington (1928-1989), a popular, sophisticated Marxist with a strongly reformist orientation. Pupil and comrade of ex-Trotskyist Max Shachtman, he followed Shachtman into the social-democratic Socialist Party of America.

Next to the aging warhorse Norman Thomas, Harrington became the SP's most prominent figure. He finally split from Shachtman over the U.S. war in Vietnam and U.S. Cold War foreign policy, both of which his mentor supported. Harrington and his co-thinkers soon connected with "new left" socialists of the New American Movement, and DSA was born in 1982.

A small force of pro-labor and liberal-oriented reformists inside the Democratic Party, DSA nourished close ties with international social democracy, represented by Olaf Palme of Sweden, Willy Brandt of West Germany, and such Israeli notables as Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin.

Harrington believed in a "realignment" strategy to transform the Democratic Party into a progressive and social-democratic labor party. This aspect of Harringtonite "orthodoxy" is no longer unequivocally embraced even within DSA's moderate wing.

As young activists began flooding into DSA in 2015, according to some of Harrington's loyal followers, this orientation was pushed aside by ultra-left and/or "Leninist" infiltrators. These "infiltrators" are accused of rejecting the virtues of liberal reformism and of supporting Palestinian liberation instead of Zionism.

Surviving oldsters adhering to the Harrington orientation have either left DSA (some publicly and angrily, as with Paul Berman and Maurice Isserman) or congregate in a small North Star Caucus which critically supports more centrally engaged DSA moderates.

Perceptions that DSA has suffered infiltration, manipulation and violation seem inaccurate. Rather, there has been a process of phenomenal (almost overwhelming) growth, with older perspectives superseded by newer

understandings.

The ancient mariners among us lived through a similar transformation in the early 1960s, when we and many thousands more radicalizing “new left” activists flooded into Students for a Democratic Society and turned SDS into something far more radical (and less clearly-defined) than what our parent group — the moderately social-democratic League for Industrial Democracy — felt was desirable or appropriate.

The new reality bustles with complexity, contradiction and confusion. The DSA website tells us:

DSA makes room for a variety of strategic approaches to fighting capitalism. Whether you're repairing your neighbors' brake lights, organizing a rent strike in your building, or fighting for public control of electric power, one thing is clear: We're stronger together.

The fact is that there isn't agreement in DSA on what strategy can make democratic socialism a reality — on which ways can really help us advance toward socialism. A key part of DSA's purpose is to help members figure out what approaches can actually be effective in bringing socialism into being.

Despite not wholly unjustified complaints about the mind-numbing tyranny of Roberts Rules of Order, however, DSA seems to be a fairly democratic organization. The caucuses have not established a dictatorship, nor have they turned DSA into a factional battleground, at least on the national level — although there have been complaints in some chapters.

The organization seems more serious than that: an interactive collection of caucuses, a work-in-progress.

## Discussion and Debate

This brings us to the discussions and debates reflected in this book, with diverse evaluations of present realities and attempts to map future directions — but also with flashes from past experience and analysis.

There is much common ground within DSA. Most would be inclined to accept Phil Locker's point that “global capitalism is mired in a deep crisis, marked by a growing chasm of inequality between nations, and between the capitalist oligarchs and everyone else,” and that “capitalism today means never-ending war, millions fleeing poverty, persecution, and catastrophic climate disaster.”

There is also widespread consensus around seeing this as fueling in the United States “a deep polarization of society.” As Locker puts it:

On the right, we have seen the dangerous rise of Trump, a reactionary demagogue mobilizing discontent against immigrants, people of color, women, trans people, and other scapegoats. On the left, democratic socialists Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), and now Zohran Mamdani have sparked — and reflected — a resurgence of socialist ideas.

This socialist resurgence was fueled by “the Great Recession fundamentally [which] discredited the dominant ideology of neoliberalism and its worship of the ‘free market’ as the cure to all social problems.” Locker adds: “This impact was all the greater, given that the crash in 2008 was the culmination of a four-decade-long capitalist offensive overseen by the political establishment of both major parties.” (295)

Despite such widely shared perceptions, there are serious differences in DSA. While Joe Burns complains that “some of the debate within DSA, frankly, is a little confusing, with people talking past each other” (266), there are also real issues involved.

Those putting this book together helpfully provide three glossaries (one on “What’s What in DSA,” one on “Language of the Labor Left,” and one on contending electoral strategies entitled “Clean Break, Dirty Break, Dirty Stay”) plus a descriptive list of DSA caucuses. This is seasoned with the editors’ sophisticated confession that “each definition reflects a political position, and the meanings are contested.” (153)

As the editors are part of a minority current within the Reform and Revolution caucus, they emphasize the “willingness to allow space for discussion and debate.” (22) [\[1\]](#)

“The existence of caucuses in DSA is a good thing and a sign of its democratic vitality,” they insist, “as long as caucuses are mindful to work in a constructive manner to advance our common struggle against capitalism.” (14) They provide URLs to the websites of the various caucuses to assist readers in exploring more fully the thinking from the varied political locations within DSA.

Sarah Hurd of Bread and Roses makes a key point applicable both to DSA and to labor organizing as a whole: despite formal votes, “you can’t force anyone to do something they don’t find worth their time.” (261)

Some are drawn to small-scale projects that “do good” — while many others reach for engagement with larger struggles to advance socialist goals. Among these, many are drawn to electoral work on behalf of progressive or socialist candidates, while others are more inclined to engage in mobilization and organizing in broad social movements around specific issues.

These include trade union protections for workers, providing housing or public transit or health care, and opposing the slaughter in Gaza. Still others reach for a combination of these, but with different proportions of time and energy devoted to one or another component.

There are two wings of the organization — tagged “left-wing” and “moderate.” (Indeed, who in a socialist organization would want to be stuck with a “right-wing” tag?) And there are contending currents within each wing.

It’s worth noting that New York City DSA — whose mayoral candidate was denounced by Donald Trump as a fanatical Communist (before being welcomed to the White House) — is a stronghold of DSA moderates, of whom Mamdani is an outstanding representative.

Two caucuses are predominant among the moderates — the Socialist Majority Caucus (“majority” now less appropriate than it once was) and Groundwork — and are inclined to work in the Democratic Party, although with somewhat different rationales. Neither is unified around the old “realignment” perspective. There are many comrades in both caucuses who join together in dismissing the possibility of transforming the Democratic Party into a labor party.

Some in the Socialist Majority Caucus (SMC) such as David Duhalde, whose essay “Stay Dirty” is reprinted in this book, envisions a permanent status of socialists in the Democratic Party as a left-wing faction, helping to pull the party as a whole in a somewhat more progressive direction.

Exploring the SMC website, however, one can find others who do nourish hopes for the Democratic Party embracing the cause of social-democratic reform.

In contrast, the dominant trend in Groundwork supports a tactical use of the Democratic Party ballot line through which DSA can run and elect candidates, while at the same time building a strong electoral machine. It anticipates that a mass socialist party will someday emerge out of this, leaving the shambles of the corporate-capitalist Democratic Party in its wake.

## The DSA Left

Red Star, Marxist Unity Group, Bread and Roses, Reform and Revolution can be found in the left wing of the organization and have become a majority bloc in recent years. They continue to accept the tactic of electing socialists by making use of the Democratic Party ballot line, but are inclined to approach the matter critically.

Transparency and accountability are highlighted, due to a strong tendency for “electeds” to compromise with and adapt to the powers-that-be within the Democratic Party establishment.

Many comrades are upset by a recurring tendency for “electeds” to set aside DSA positions that seem politically inconvenient. Whether such offenses should result in public criticisms, dis-endorsement, or even expulsion from DSA is a topic of discussion, with divergent positions being expressed.

A widespread sentiment in favor of breaking, sooner or later, from the Democratic Party is complicated by such details as: how much sooner or how much later; how uniform such a break should be; what would be defining signals that the time has come; etc.

The left-wing caucuses also tilt toward preferring union struggles and various social movements to electoralism — though many in the DSA left are also keenly aware that DSA has grown largely through the electoral campaigns of Bernie Sanders, AOC, and other open democratic socialists seeking Democratic Party nomination.

Another significant fissure has opened up around what is called “campism,” of which Red Star appears to be the foremost proponent. Campism means aligning with, and being more or less uncritical of, all global forces who are in the “camp” that purportedly opposes U.S. imperialism.

Within that supposed camp are authoritarian dictatorships — some claiming to be socialist, and others that are conservative and openly anti-socialist, in some cases ultra-religious.

As leftwing DSA member Dan La Botz writes:

Socialist internationalism, as conceived by Karl Marx and other 19th and early 20th century Marxists, was the notion that socialists should express their solidarity with the world's working classes, with the poor, and with the oppressed of all sorts in all countries.

Yet within that presumably “anti-imperialism” camp, one can find widespread oppression and exploitation and systematic violations of workers’ rights. LaBotz concludes that campism represents “a profound deformation of socialist internationalism.” (347, 349)

Responding to such perspectives, Red Star militant Sam Heft-Luthy argues for an “informed and vigorous solidarity with socialist and anti-imperialist movements” and on a willingness to learn from “modern socialist societies.” Only such “an open and positive spirit of international solidarity” can provide “a positive program for anti-imperialism” to guide DSA’s efforts. (362-3, 366)

The debate sharpened around the evaluation of Hamas in the Palestinian struggle — particularly after the Hamas-led massacre of civilians of October 7, 2023, consequently used as a pretext by the Israeli government for the ongoing genocidal assault on Gaza’s Palestinian population.

A polemic within DSA by Red Star members, entitled “We Do Not Condemn Hamas, and Neither Should You” was followed by one from Reform and Revolution members, “We Do Not Tail Behind Hamas, and Neither Should You.” Both polemics can be found in A User’s Guide to DSA. (380-7, 385-405)

Another point of difference involves how to characterize “Trumpism.” Some matter-of-factly refer to it as fascism — for example, Jesse Hagopian’s comment on the dissonance in the United States of “the ‘world’s greatest democracy’ [now being] under the rule of a fascist” (103) — while others agree with Stephan Kimmerle:

Unlike classical fascism, Trump’s presidency has not eradicated all forms of democracy or working-class self-organization. Although he has steered towards a more authoritarian system, his methods rely on the capitalist state (ICE etc.), rather than the direct force of fascist paramilitary gangs on the streets, to implement policies like arresting immigrants and assaults on the left. The system still retains checks and balances and a separation of powers, despite an increasing and threatening concentration of power in the executive. (138)

Yet this almost seems a terminological quibble. Most DSAers favor making use of still-existing democratic opportunities to agitate, organize and massively mobilize against the anti-democratic, repressive, oppressive activities of the Trump regime.

## Anti-Racist and Class Perspectives

Anti-racism and class struggle have been central to discussions in DSA, as has been the tension between political principles and political relevance.

“As despicable as Trump’s relentless attacks on Black people and immigrants have been, they are not merely the product of personal bigotry,” notes Jesse Hagopian. “The fact is, the capitalist system has long relied on racism as a central mechanism for maintaining the power of capital over labor.” (95)

Drawing on insights of C.L.R. James, he emphasizes the centrality of the anti-racist struggle in U.S. history:

The Black freedom struggle has never only benefited Black people. Black revolt has consistently been the backbeat that moves others to get up off of that thing and struggle for something better — from the abolitionist movement fueling women's suffrage, to Reconstruction's public schools and multiracial Union Leagues. (97)

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This continues down to more recent times, as “the foundational groove of Black struggle set in motion the antiwar, student, feminist, Indigenous, LGBTQIA+, working-class movements and strike waves which riffed on that rhythm — each one improvising its own verse while staying in the shared key of liberation.” (98)

Stressing what some analysts call “intersectionality,” he argues that “struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, and xenophobia are not distractions from the class struggle — they are the terrain upon which a truly unified, fighting working class must be built.” (103)

Rashad X of the Marxist Unity Group focuses on achieving Black Liberation through creating “three main things: democratic conditions, safety from racial terror, and economic equality. All this ties to self-determination.”

He elaborates:

You can't have self-determination without an equal say in democratic governance, both within a nation and on a global scale. You can't have Black liberation if Black people are at risk of facing racial terror, whether from the state, vigilantes, or otherwise. And you can't have Black liberation without a level of economic equality when it comes to development. (89)

He blends two approaches that are sometimes counterpoised: African American self-determination and revolutionary integration, and rejects racial separation within revolutionary parties and socialist republics. Questions can be raised about whether these two approaches can be harmoniously blended, and how easily the racial fragmentation of the working class can be overcome since racism is so deep-rooted in our history.

Further tensions inherent in the dynamics of the class struggle are pinpointed by other contributions.

Joe Burns, a leftwing labor activist who authored *Class Struggle Unionism*, points out that unions, almost by definition, are an integral part of the capitalist economy: “Even if we have the most militant unions, you're still negotiating the terms of your exploitation.”

Of course, this is the case with unions that are overtly corrupt, also with those led by pro-capitalist and class-collaborationist bureaucracies (“business unions”), but Burns also explains that “militant unionism in and of itself cannot resolve the contradiction, because the billionaires are going to keep getting billions.”

Such accumulating profits (or accumulating capital) adds up to considerable economic power. “Over time, you give someone more and more power. Guess what? Eventually, they're gonna use it to crush you.”

Burns concludes: “Employers very much view us as in a fight to the death. They want to exterminate unionism.” Many in the labor movement, even the labor left, “crave stability and stable labor relations. But that is fiction.” (268)

Burns is also critical of the influential left-wing orientation promoted by the late Jane McAlevey. “To me,” he argues, “Jane McAlevey's approach is very much based on this idea that the working class needs these outside organizers to come in and get them to fight. And so then it becomes a question of organizing skills and techniques.”

But it is a false assumption “that struggle comes from outside the workplace and is imported in there.” Rather,

“struggle comes because of the conditions of capitalism, and in particular the conditions and contradictions in that workplace.” (265)

Another experienced labor activist, Stephan Kimmerle, reflects:

There is a lot of strength in many tactics promoted by Jane McAlevey. However, they need to be combined with the fundamental wisdom of the Rank-and-File Strategy [promoted by revolutionary socialist labor analyst Kim Moody] — the need to organize for a class-struggle approach and a vibrant democracy within the labor movement, against the resistance of the bureaucracy. (283)

An interesting twist comes from Bread and Roses member Jane Slaughter. She appreciates the enthusiasm for successful rank-and-file unionizing actions in the Starbucks chain, but raises a significant challenge.

She quotes one Starbucks worker: “Oh my gosh, it was a beautiful feeling to know that we did it. We showed up for each other, and we didn’t allow these corporations to continuously abuse us. It felt like victory, but also just sweet liberation.”

Slaughter comments: “It’s an important union struggle; it’s also a coffee shop.” Her point is that “union strategists [must] decide where they need to grow their union in order to achieve power against their corporate counterparts.” (270-271)

Yet such strategists are generally connected with the union staffs (or “bureaucracies”) that Burns and Kimmerle warn against. Such matters are wrestled with in contributions throughout this volume.

## Learning

A “purist” bent prevalent in DSA (as in much of today’s left-wing and progressive movement) crops up in various ways. Many members are not inclined to work with non-socialists who put forward positions that are deemed inadequate.

Some shun even non-DSA socialists in different organizations. A “Build DSA” sentiment often cuts across activist engagement with broader coalitions and consequent abstention from real struggles.

Such self-isolation is critically targeted by more than one author in this collection. “We can’t retreat within ourselves,” insists David Vibert, a Bread and Roses activist in the Zohran Mamdani campaign.

We need to maintain and build on the coalition that Zohran assembled not to just help him pass reforms from on high down to us, but because a militant coalition of the working class is the true hope for achieving socialism in the United States. (234)

Also relating to the Mamdani campaign are comments of editor and Reform and Revolution minority member Philip Locker, speaking to a common criticism on the Left that Mamdani's program contained merely reforms: "Working people will need to fight for each of these reforms as fiercely as the billionaire class will fight against them." (296)

A few contributors argue for the relevance of the United Front orientation advanced in the Communist International of the early 1920s by Lenin, Trotsky, and others. Todd Chretien usefully devotes a whole page to "ABCs of a United Front." (123)

Discussing the massive "No Kings" protests against Trump's policies, Stephan Kimmerle quotes Irish comrade Cian Prendiville of the substantial group People Before Profit, who asserts that "we cannot afford to simply stand aside in 'splendid isolation,' and criticize from the sidelines," but adds that a genuine united front cannot be seen as a joint campaign in which coalition partners "simply brush differences with partners under the rug." Rather, "we should fight for united fronts to be arenas of debate and discussion as well." Kimmerle sums up:

A United Front approach ... entails both: unity in action, even with liberal forces, against Trump, but with full independence, to promote clear socialist and working-class politics against liberalism and Democratic [Party] politics currently leading the movement. (148, 150)

Learning is crucial in all such discussions, debates, and activist experience. In one of his last documents (1923) "Better Fewer, But Better," Lenin argued against comrades being know-it-alls. Instead, "we must at all costs set out, first, to learn, secondly, to learn, and thirdly, to learn, and then see to it that ... learning shall really become part of our very being."

Learning not just from books and study groups, but especially from activist efforts, as we prepare for transformative struggles of the near future. *A User's Guide to DSA* advances that process.

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[1] In the view of the editors of the book, R&R has shifted away from its original positions in the direction of the dominant politics on the far left of DSA. Examples include a less critical assessment of the reformist character of DSA, a changed approach to the 2024 presidential election compared to the position R&R had in 2020, and a new position on how to win Palestinian liberation.