

READERS' VIEW

The Left in the US: What can we do with the Democrats?

Thursday 12 July 2018, by [DORIAN B.](#), [FARBMAN Jason](#), [ZILL Zach](#) (Date first published: 3 July 2018).

Socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's stunning upset in a congressional primary election against one of the most powerful Democrats in the U.S. House has inspired discussion and debate about how this campaign fits into the project of advancing the socialist left. *Socialist Worker* is hosting a dialogue in our Readers' Views column. This first installment has two contributions: from Dorian B., and from Jason Farbman and Zach Zill.

Confronting the Question of Socialist Electoral Strategy Today

Dorian B. | There is a popular socialist movement emerging in the U.S. That is a sentence I did not think I would be writing in 2018 when I first became an organized socialist five years ago. At the time, there was certainly a broad political radicalization underway, but no immediate signs of socialist organization on a mass scale on the horizon.

The Bernie Sanders campaign in the 2015-16 Democratic Party primary changed all that. Sanders linked up with the political radicalization which had been growing for over a decade and helped lend it a coherent vision: socialism, a still inexact project for the transformation of society, but one that puts working-class people at the center and unites their common struggles into one.

For already committed socialists, this was a major breakthrough. I remember attending a Sanders campaign rally in the Bronx and selling the print edition of this newspaper *Socialist Worker*. Except that on that day they were basically selling themselves. "*Socialist Worker*! Hey, I'm a socialist worker!" one person said to me as they asked for a paper.

In a country whose legacy of right-wing repression has built a uniquely hostile culture toward socialist politics, these changes were and continue to be dizzying.

Still, at the time, I wasn't aware that I was witnessing only the beginnings of a new movement. After Sanders' extraordinary success in the primaries, a socialist organization — the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) — ballooned in size.

Thousands upon thousands of radicalizing people wanted to put their newfound socialist ideas into practice. They joined in droves an organization which closely identified with Sanders' project, and came in still greater numbers once the Trump disaster hit the country.

Since that time, the DSA has continued to grow — recently passing the 40,000 mark — and achieved success electing socialists to office in several state races, most recently in the high-profile

Democratic primary competition for New York's 14th congressional district in the Bronx and Queens, in which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez defeated incumbent Joe Crowley, one of the most powerful Democrats in Congress.

These dramatic changes can be difficult to process. For decades, socialists have been unable to reach a mass audience and to organize in numbers of scale. And now, all of a sudden, they've done precisely that. Part of the reason why it has been hard to come to terms with this change is that, speaking for myself, I had always assumed that the Democratic Party was so monolithic that it could never be used as a vehicle to foster a new political project, much less a socialist one.

The Democratic Party is a "graveyard of social movements," I rightly concluded from the history of the populist, labor and civil rights movements of the last two centuries. But from 2016-18, the tiny left wing of the Democratic Party has actually served as an incubator, a cradle for a new socialist movement.

This is not to say that the party will not become a graveyard once again (hopefully it won't!), but that the contradictions within it, and between the party leadership and its base, have helped spawn a socialist resurgence in this period.

To put it in the simplest possible terms: Bernie Sanders decisively helped to re-popularize socialism by running for president as a Democrat, several others have since done the same at other levels of government, and a political entity, the DSA has given that ferment an organizational expression.

To be sure, none of this would have been possible without the longer-term political radicalization which has pushed millions toward alternative forms of politics and protest. But it is equally true that there would be no socialist organization on a higher scale emerging in the U.S. today had *that candidate* not run in *that party*.

After the working-class militant Ocasio-Cortez's ousting of Crowley, Nancy Pelosi's preferred successor as House Speaker, the Democratic Party leadership is gearing up to combat the socialist menace by whatever means at its disposal. And the party machine is powerful — so powerful that this new socialist movement will either be destroyed or severely set back if it is not able to break from the party and create an independent force.

A fundamental principle of socialist organizing is that the working class must have its own political party to successfully fight this system. That principle remains every bit as applicable today in 2018 as it did in 1968, 1918 and 1868.

The question that faces us now is: how can we as socialists organize to make sure that the new socialist movement — growing today through and in connection with candidates running in the Democratic Party — evolves to form a new party controlled by workers instead of capitalists? What strategies and tactics can we use to help make sure that happens?

Much of this will have to happen through struggle outside the electoral arena, through an expansion of the strike movement so brilliantly initiated by the teachers this spring, and a flowering of popular protest. And it will also require persistent efforts to grow and develop organizations like the International Socialist Organization, which can put forward a long-term vision and method for building a socialist society. But this work must also have an (interrelated) electoral component.

One answer to the question of party politics in our electoral strategy is: "Never run as a Democrat and never vote for or support Democratic candidates because no socialist movement can be built that way." The problem with this answer is that it is based on a premise which has been decisively

proven wrong during the last two years. A socialist movement is being built that way before our very eyes.

A second answer is to support all socialist and working-class militants no matter what party they run in, all the while arguing tenaciously with everyone in our movement that our goal must be to form a new party of our own — by winning activists to run as independents today, and by winning socialists inside the Democratic Party to our perspective.

In other words, we continue to make the argument about the need for independence, and we attempt to win and support people to run independently at every opportunity — but we don't withhold our support from socialists running as Democrats, because we recognize that they are playing a major role in building socialist organization today (which can potentially help foster conditions for a new party in the future).

Of course, this second answer carries with it the risk that our efforts won't succeed and that the Democratic Party establishment will find a way to stamp out, divide and neutralize our growth before we are able to gain the degree of strength we need — in conjunction with extra-electoral struggles — to form an independent party.

But the first answer also carries with it a big risk: that our now disproved belief that socialism can never be built in any form through the Democratic Party will lead us to argue against building it all.

As thousands mobilize to elect socialists — and to build organization and struggle using the new audiences these elections help to create — will we argue not to vote for or support them when they run as Democrats, even while they are contributing positively to the growth of our common struggle and to the building of socialist organizations which have struggled to get off the ground for nearly three generations?

This is a difficult question to answer, and one that we have to address as quickly as possible, as the political development of the socialist movement continues.

It is not a question of principle or of our basic political program. For those who believe that we must build a new party — and that this entire system must be replaced through mass, working-class organization — nothing inherent in these principles gives us an answer to this concrete problem.

The tactical issue we face is over what we must do today to help foster the independent growth of the new socialist and working-class movement in the U.S. The tactics we choose will have to be responsive to the trajectory of events as it unfolds from here.

Simply asserting that socialists must build an independent party, an argument which is absolutely correct, does not give us a complete answer to the question. It poses the problem and identifies the right objective, but leaves the path toward this objective under our current conditions undefined and under-theorized.

I look forward to charting that path together with everyone who shares the project of *Socialist Worker*.

What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About the Democratic Party

Jason Farbman and Zach Zill | On the day after Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's stunning victory, the internet lit up with leftist joy. Twelve hundred people joined DSA. "Socialism" was the top search at Merriam-Webster [\[1\]](#). Ocasio-Cortez's face was splashed across every news outlet in the country. She appeared on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," [\[2\]](#) explaining socialism means that "no

person in America should be too poor to live.” Thunderous applause filled the theater.

That same day, *Socialist Worker* ran an article covering the Ocasio-Cortez election, called “How far can the left go in the Democratic Party?” [3] In the article, authors Alan Maass and Elizabeth Schulte led with an exuberance about Ocasio-Cortez’s victory that became a warning to the left: You will not be able to take over the Democratic Party.

We very much agree with their enthusiasm. As longtime socialists, we also agree when Maass and Schulte argue that the Democratic Party cannot be taken over as a force for our collective liberation.

But there is a rich vein of political and strategic questions that the article did not address. Ocasio-Cortez’s victory is one of the clearest signs to date that the world is changing, and new opportunities are opening up for socialists in the U.S. Socialists today face a basic question whose urgency and concreteness is felt more acutely with every step forward that our movement takes: How do we go from here to an independent political party of the working class?

We believe this is a strategic question. It should be informed by political principles, but it cannot be reduced to a set of principles or slogans. Conflating strategy and principle leads Maass and Schulte to identify only two positions on the question of the left’s relationship to the Democratic Party: a) work within the Democratic Party, or (b) do not work within the Democratic Party.

But there is a third position: c) use the Democratic Party as a launching pad to cohere a mass base for socialism, which could eventually break away into independent political activity [4]. There are many socialists, particularly some in the DSA, who make this very case.

At least for now, those comrades appear to be correct when they argue to use Democratic ballot lines to create a mass base for socialism. DSA now has over 40,000 members, and recent electoral campaigns such as AOC’s have exposed millions of new people to socialist ideas and organizations.

Seven questions of socialist strategy

We believe our organization needs more specific, strategic conversations about how to relate to the ongoing radicalization through socialist candidacies — both on and off the Democratic ballot line.

Here are some examples of strategic questions we have:

1. How significant is current electoral activity in building a socialist movement?

If ISO members think electoral activity is of critical importance, should we support socialists within the Democratic Party? Should we engage in our own electoral campaigns? Short of supporting Democratic candidates, are there other contributions we can make in the electoral realm?

2. What do other active and organized socialists think the end goal is?

What proportion are trying to reform the Democrats versus building up support for an eventual break toward an independent socialist party? How is that proportion changing, if at all?

3. Can socialists effectively convince people about electoral strategy without participating? Can they recognize and act on opportunities on Democratic ballot lines, without wavering on the Democratic Party as an ultimate graveyard for the left?

In this moment, electoral socialism is getting a mass expression through the efforts of many allies, working primarily within the Democratic Party. Is it a tenable position to arrive on the scene after a

campaign has already succeeded, offering what seems patently contradictory: “We are so excited about this development! We think it’s ultimately going nowhere! We did not and would not work on a similar campaign!”

4. How much influence would a small group of revolutionary socialists be able to have in the context of a successful candidacy like Ocasio-Cortez’s?

Would we simply be steamrolled by the far greater pressures exerted on her by the neoliberal Democratic establishment and various reformist currents that have adapted to working within the Democratic Party? Or would our track record of promoting socialism and actively building social movements, including in Ocasio-Cortez’s district, carry some weight?

5. How can the ISO support Ocasio-Cortez going forward, without reinforcing the idea that the Democratic Party is on our side?

Ocasio-Cortez will likely be sworn in to Congress this coming January. She has pledged to push for single-payer health care; demilitarizing the police and ending the war on drugs; and guaranteed paid family and sick leave; among many others issues [<https://ocasio2018.com/issues>]. *The left and social movements are going to have to think hard about how to organize the power to effectively support these and other initiatives. And they will have to defend her against inevitable attacks from the Democratic Party establishment. How does our organization fit into this picture?*

6. How can socialists make sure Ocasio-Cortez sticks to her socialist politics and does not get co-opted by the party machine?

One model might be the regular meetings that Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner has with a committee to keep him accountable. Krasner was propelled into office due in significant part to the efforts of the Campaign for a Just DA [5], a coalition of groups dealing with issues ranging from youth incarceration to the bail system to immigration.

They did not just campaign for him, as Waging Nonviolence reported [6], but also “drafted in-depth policy proposals. Prisoners contributed directly to a number of these proposals. The coalition then articulated a set of demands for the first 100 days in office for the new district attorney.” In a city with a legendarily powerful police force, Krasner’s political oxygen will only come from a sustained and growing coalition.

What would it mean for our organization to gain entry and participate in such a coalition?

7. How can the ISO work with Ocasio-Cortez (we have plenty of comrades living in her district) to build social movements, and to use this platform to amplify and advance our struggles in the streets?

Some examples might include:

- **Defending attacks on education.** Could the Movement of Rank and File Educators [7], the social justice caucus of the United Federation of Teachers, partner with Ocasio-Cortez and community groups — to bridge rank and file organizing with working class communities of color?
- **On abortion.** New York City for Abortion Rights [8] has organized numerous clinic defenses outside Bronx Abortion. This work has allowed our members to make strategic arguments about the dangers of compromising on abortion [9], criticizing the Democratic Party and even criticizing Bernie Sanders, that convinced others.

- To abolish ICE. Ocasio-Cortez took a strong position to abolish ICE [10]. What is the potential for NYC members working on immigrant rights to enter a coalition that keeps pushing the demand into the mainstream?

- **Solidarity with Palestinians.** For example, pushing back against attempts to criminalize the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement in solidarity with Palestinians.

Let's get to it

None of these questions can be answered in the abstract. They can only be answered with lived experience, and cannot be forecast with certainty. There is an understandable weighing of the potential risks and rewards offered by any course of action forward.

But we see Ocasio-Cortez's election as a trend that will continue — the *New York Daily News* is already asking if little-known Julia Salazar [11], running for state senate in Brooklyn, will “become the next Ocasio-Cortez.”

We think it a necessary and urgent task to develop a more concrete perspective on how and when to engage with socialist candidacies. Such work does not exclude a continued emphasis on the primary importance of building social struggles outside the electoral realm.

Many of these candidates, including Ocasio-Cortez, have indicated they want to build a new Democratic Party. Many socialists express concerns these victories will reinforce ideas that the Democratic Party can be taken over by the left. We take this concern seriously, but wonder if this isn't missing the forest for the trees. Individual supporters of socialist candidates are likely hold two ideas simultaneously: hopes that the Democratic Party can be reformed, and excitement in promoting a socialist vision for our society. This is a dynamic situation, and people's ideas are in flux.

Other concerns raised by socialists are that Ocasio-Cortez is bound to either burn out or sell out. That either the neoliberal Democratic leadership will drive her out of office, or they will pressure and co-opt her into moderating her positions and making peace with capitalism. Again, the situation is in flux.

Supporters of Ocasio-Cortez will quickly and repeatedly run up against the limitations of a Democratic Party that is an institutional pillar of U.S. capitalism. Yet between rising hopes fueled by her victory and frustrated attempts to work through the “proper channels,” these same supporters will draw many lessons. Which way these lessons break will determine whether eager new socialists become co-opted, burn out and fall away, or emerge hardened by the experience, with a clearer understanding of what it will ultimately take to realize a new world.

Does it matter what the ISO does? We would argue yes. That doesn't mean we are guaranteed to prevent a sellout or crash-out. But it does require us to take action.

We very much agree with a recent analysis in *Jacobin* [12]:

“Ocasio-Cortez — a brilliant candidate at the right moment — brought in a whole mess of volunteers from all over the place, from other organizations as well as off the street. What's true, I think, is that DSA was the biggest organized bloc of her volunteers. I hope Alexandria or someone else is out there organizing the rest of them! The worst thing about electoral work is that sometimes there's no organization ready to build on the connections it creates; we need to make sure that doesn't happen

here.”

We are in a period with promise unlike any other in our lifetimes. We don't know how long this window will last, but we know there is an urgent need for socialist groups to cooperate in organizing socialism's emerging mass base into an active and militant movement. Our organization is faced with deeply challenging strategic questions. We very much look forward to discussing and formulating strategies to organize an emerging mass base of socialists into a militant wing of the U.S. left.

Dorian B., and from Jason Farbman and Zach Zill

P.S.

* July 3, 2018:

<http://socialistworker.org/2018/07/03/what-can-we-do-with-the-democrats>

Footnotes

[1] <https://twitter.com/MerriamWebster>

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_1G4_oPt_o

[3] ESSF (article 45221), [United States: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez victory - How far can the Left go in the Democratic Party?](#).

[4] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/12/democratic-party-minnesota-farmer-labor-floyd-olson>

[5] <https://www.phillydaforthethepeople.org>

[6] <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/prisoners-organized-elect-larry-krasner-philadelphia-district-attorney/>

[7] <https://morecaucusnyc.org>

[8] <https://abortionrights.nyc>

[9] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/08/abortion-democrats-bernie-sanders-aclu-roe-mello>

[10] <https://theintercept.com/2018/06/27/abolish-ice-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/>

[11] <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/ny-pol-ocasio-cortez-crowley-salazar-senate-crowley-20180701-story.html>

[12] ESSF (article 45223), [United States, New York: Why Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Won.](#)