

READERS' VIEW

United States: Socialists, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and the Democratic Party

Friday 13 July 2018, by [LE BLANC Paul](#), [MAASS Alan](#), [ROESCH Jennifer](#) (Date first published: 4 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. SocialistWorker.org is hosting a dialogue in our Readers' Views column. This second installment has contributions from Alan Maass and Jen Roesch, and from Paul Le Blanc.

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What We Do Talk About When We Talk About the Democratic Party

Alan Maass and Jen Roesch | No one thought before one week ago that a proud member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) will, in all likelihood, become the youngest woman to take a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. So the enthusiastic discussion around the left is raising a lot of questions (and possible answers), both old and brand new.

There are a million things to say — and we look forward to people saying them in this regular space that SW has opened up, starting with yesterday's "What can we do with the Democrats?" [\[1\]](#)

But among the many points in this discussion, let's start with this: The contributions by Dorian B. and Jason Farbman and Zach Zill yesterday — and among SW readers and members of the International Socialist Organization online — generally share an agreement that the working class needs political independence from the two-party duopoly, and that the future development of the left will necessitate a break from the Democrats.

As exciting as her victory is, the fact is that Ocasio-Cortez doesn't appear to agree with this — at least not at this stage. She ran a campaign that articulated working-class politics and a broad vision of socialism, but she also emphasized the idea that a "different kind of Democrat" can make the party more representative of working people.

She's a leader of the Justice Democrats [\[2\]](#), which is running candidates in 38 races and whose website invites people to join them in "taking the party back." While they all share a progressive platform, these candidates range from former Obama appointees to open socialists like Ocasio-

Cortez. She was recruited to run by Brand New Congress, a political action committee founded by former Sanders staffers, and her campaign was shaped by it, as well as by the DSA.

We start with this not to be contrarian, but in order to try to understand the full picture. The prospect of participating in some way in a vibrant and openly socialist campaign within the Democratic Party has fired the imaginations of some ISO members and *SW* readers, who hope this could help answer the question that Jason and Zach pose: “How do we go from here to an independent political party of the working class?”

But it’s important to bear in mind, as we assess the possibilities, that any attempt to do so would have to reckon not only with a Democratic apparatus that regards Ocasio-Cortez with muted (so far) hostility, but with a candidate whose strategy and vision seems to differ with that goal.

Many DSA members do share the aim of an independent party to the left of the Democrats, but this position isn’t unanimous. And these comrades confront a paradox: The success of socialist candidates running on the Democratic ballot line raises the profile for socialism, but it also strengthens the position of those who argue that DSA should remain within the Democratic Party.

Dorian is right that the revival of socialism today and especially the explosive growth of socialist organization, most of all in the DSA, wouldn’t have taken place without the popularity of Bernie Sanders’ 2016 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

But Sanders would be one of the loudest voices — and certainly one of the most effective ones — opposed to any break from the Democrats to form an independent left party.

That shouldn’t stop us from identifying with the popularization of socialism that Sanders is responsible for, nor from organizing around the issues where Sanders proposes initiatives we support. But we also should acknowledge where our politics and projects differ.

What we celebrate

Is it “patently contradictory,” as Jason and Zach write, to be enthusiastic about Sanders’ success or Ocasio-Cortez’s upset win, despite our long-standing opposition to campaigns within the Democratic Party?

We don’t think so. First, Ocasio-Cortez’s victory is obviously a welcome demonstration of the appeal of socialist ideas, not just the ideas of socialist candidates.

In a somewhat dismal primary season, her win reasserted that there is discontent among large numbers of people who loyally vote for the Democrats. If there wasn’t, all of our jobs would be harder.

Ocasio-Cortez’s success also came amid an upsurge of protest against Trump’s anti-immigrant barbarism, and with the call to “Abolish ICE” at its center, her campaign contributed to the further development of that groundswell of resistance.

There is no contradiction in celebrating all this while maintaining the ISO’s position — based on an assessment of history and continuing analysis, not a religious adherence to doctrine — that left initiatives within the Democratic Party won’t, on balance, build the revolutionary socialist project, but threaten to confine it in a years-long effort to advance the left from within a party that, as an institution, opposes the left.

Does raising this objection in the current moment mean we are cutting ourselves off from the

socialist movement or the radicalization that propels campaigns like Ocasio-Cortez's?

We have to leave it to readers to judge from their experience. The pages of this website are filled with reports of collaboration on the left, involving the ISO, DSA, Socialist Alternative and other organizations — notice the number of joint socialist contingents mentioned in *SW*'s roundup of the June 30 mobilizations, for example [3].

None of that was hindered by disagreements over the character of the Democratic Party. Nor, if this weekend's Socialism 2018 conference is any guide [4], have these disagreements stopped an ongoing discussion involving the ISO, DSA and many others about the issues that face all of us, including the elections.

Our discussion of what's next needs this wider context — and, above all, an understanding of the centrality of struggle to winning change. This is what some comrades in the DSA seem to be stressing when they make the case, while disagreeing with elements of the analysis at *Socialist Worker*, that the enthusiasm generated by Ocasio-Cortez's victory has to be connected to social justice movements and organizing.

"Ocasio-Cortez's victory and instant celebrity shows how working people respond to class-based politics," Matt Stone and Jeremy Gong wrote at *Jacobin* [5]. "Now that millions are curious about socialism, our task is to organize and mobilize as many of them as possible — at the ballot box and beyond."

The history matters

So why not jump in and see? Couldn't the ISO consider a short-term engagement in Democratic campaigns, for open socialists only, in collaboration with allies on the left, to build up forces for an independent party — and then, presumably, get out?

Here is where the history of the left and the Democratic Party needs to be remembered. This isn't the first time that DSA members have been elected to Congress or top political office — former California Rep. Ron Dellums and former New York City Mayor David Dinkins are two examples.

And the last mass radicalization of the 1960s and early 1970s led to a much larger number of Black radicals turning to elections in an attempt to win greater political power and consolidate the left. Overwhelmingly, the outcome was that the radicals were blocked from changing the balance of power, and they ended up responsible for overseeing austerity [6].

The left didn't become stronger. The Democratic Party did.

There's a lot more to that story for future contributions to take up. And the unique elements of what's taking place now have to be appreciated. This is no longer David Dinkins' DSA, for example.

On this score, we highly recommend reading the *Socialist Worker* article "Left inside the Chicago machine?" by Brian Bean and Tyler Zimmer [7]. It is in part about one of DSA's most prominent officeholders, Chicago City Council member Carlos Ramirez-Rosa.

Ramirez-Rosa is unique among Chicago elected officials for his bold, principled — and usually very lonely — stands against the political and business elite in a city run by Democrats. He has paid the price of being ostracized by even liberals in the city and state party establishment.

But in the face of the limitations imposed on anyone in his position, Ramirez-Rosa has had to make compromises.

When his hope to become the Democratic candidate for a House seat was thwarted by a united Democratic machine behind Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” García, Ramirez-Rosa not only bowed to the inevitable and dropped out, but he endorsed García — who has defended many of the privatization and austerity policies that Ramirez-Rosa steadfastly opposes — in order not to divide the “progressive movement.”

Ramirez-Rosa may feel he had no choice but to make this appeal to “unity” on someone else’s terms, but this shows the intense pressure that comes with operating within the Democratic Party.

Rather than strengthen the left, such concessions reinforce the common sense that we should accept the limitations imposed by working “inside the system” — and, of course, the task of building a stronger basis for an alternative outside the Democratic Party is further postponed.

The compromises necessary to operate successfully within the Democratic Party don’t end with the decision to use its ballot line. They begin there.

All these pressures will be felt intensely by Ocasio-Cortez. Her victory opens the door to real questions — about political power, political organization, how elected officials are held accountable to social movements — but at a time when the broader left that could serve as a source of strength against the Democratic machine is still weak.

We don’t mean to imply at all that we assume she will fail. But it would be short-sighted not to recognize the danger for the left in a disappointing outcome — with an elected socialist forced into compromises, where accountability is in question, and where the possibilities for founding an independent left alternative are put off once again.

This is why we think it remains vital for revolutionary socialists to maintain independence from the Democratic Party.

What is to be done?

Jason and Zach write that “[t]he left and social movements are going to have to think hard about how to organize the power to effectively support” the kind of initiatives that Ocasio-Cortez has promised to pursue, and we completely agree.

There are a multitude of ways that socialist organizations like the ISO can build struggle and movements from below in collaboration with such initiatives. And this will contribute the most effective counter to the inevitable attempts by the Democratic Party power structure to get Ocasio-Cortez to capitulate.

None of this activism — nor any of the discussions we want to have with people energized and inspired by her victory — is made impossible by not having participated in Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign or in the Democratic Party as a whole.

This is where it’s important that our imaginations are excited by Ocasio-Cortez’s success — in looking for the opportunities it opens up for building the power and organization of social movements and the working class. We believe we can do that at the same time that we make a case about the need for those struggles and organizations to remain independent of the Democratic Party.

The Democrats, Strategy and Accountability

Paul Le Blanc | I am deeply impressed with the remarkable growth, leftward movement and electoral successes of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

In my native Pittsburgh, DSA has grown from a dozen or so paper members to more than 600 predominantly young members. I am told (by one of several trusted old friends who recently joined the group) that “only” about 100 are truly active members. Still impressive!

I am told they are engaged in several study groups and an array of social struggles. Some have been especially active in helping two open socialists (Sara Innamorato and Summer Lee) defeat long-standing incumbents in Democratic primaries for the state legislature. Even more recently, in New York City, a dynamic candidate named Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez similarly carried out a Congressional primary upset. And more seems to be popping in other cities.

I have not been inclined to follow some of my friends into the DSA. I am still under the spell of an old hero, Eugene V. Debs, who argued the place of socialists is not in one of the two capitalist political parties, but in the ranks of a socialist movement, building a revolutionary alternative to those parties. It is better, he said, to vote for what you want (socialism) and lose than to vote for what you don't want (capitalism with a liberal face) and win.

But DSA comrades seem to be doing something new, and I think there are things to learn from their experience. I will emphasize what strikes me as new in the DSA initiative, and then pose the questions I have.

Young Rebels and Tiresome Elders

There are some on the left who have, over the years, sought to make the Democratic Party better, build up the progressive wing of that party and coexist inside that party, helping to win elections and advance liberal legislation and policies around issues such as health, education, civil liberties, civil rights, labor rights, peace, etc.

Generally, those who made such decisions — coming out of traditions associated with the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, fragments from the Trotskyist and Maoist movements, and even various anarchists — went through a metamorphosis that made them indistinguishable from liberals who favor social reforms, while accepting (whether happily or unhappily) the continued existence of the capitalist system.

Such left-wing elements going into the Democratic Party began with a commitment to change the world *radically* — that is, not simply seeking to alleviate the problems, but going to the root of the problems in order to end what was causing the problems, an oppressive and exploitative system.

This radical commitment became compromised and diluted, and many of them went on to become an integral part of the status quo against which younger generations periodically rebelled.

Such rebellions were caused by a system that continued to generate injustices and violence and oppression. And some also rebelled because their once radical elders continued to give voice to the

old ideals (such as “liberty and justice for all”) while seeming to betray them in practice. This was certainly an issue for many youthful radicals of the 1960s.

Of course, some of those young rebels, as they inevitably aged, were destined to follow the path of their de-radicalized elders. Others, remaining “true to the Cause,” were destined, perhaps all too often, to unload advice and admonitions onto future generations of radicalized youth.

The DSA comrades, however, appear to be doing things differently than was the case with the old leftists seeking to permeate the Democratic Party. Running not simply as “good liberals,” but instead as open socialists, they appear to be challenging the liberal-centrist power structures dominating the Democratic Party and aggressively bringing socialist ideas and perspectives into the political mainstream, giving focus to the radicalization that is deepening in our country. One senses their goal is not to coexist within the Democratic Party — it is socialism.

The Socialist Goal

The goal of all serious socialists is to build a mass force made up of popular movements and popular struggles in the interest of the great majority of our people — those who produce the goods and services that we all need, the class of laboring people who are not rich, all people who suffer the variety of oppressions that afflict our society, those who want to push back against the degradation of our cultural and natural environment, those who hunger for a society of the free and the equal.

The socialist force that we need will fight for needed social and democratic reforms in the here and now. Such a force would at the same time build the necessary consciousness, organizations, experiences and commitments among more and more people, to help win even more democratic and social reforms in the future.

As Rosa Luxemburg put it: “The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the Social Democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim.”

Social revolution means challenging the economic dictatorship that capitalists, particularly the multinational corporations, have over the economic resources and institutions on which our lives depend. Luxemburg showed how that dictatorship harnesses our economic life to the insatiable drive of wealthy elites to accumulate profits for themselves — at our expense. And she called for breaking the political power that flows from that economic power.

The challenge that must be posed, she was convinced, must be built up in a way that can finally *end that dictatorship*. As the producers and consumers whose life-activity makes the economy go, we need to replace economic dictatorship with economic democracy. We need socialism.

Strategy and Accountability

This raises the questions of strategy and accountability.

Let us imagine the rough outline of a strategy for building socialism through the Democratic Party. This would involve a commitment not to somehow get along with the pro-capitalist establishment that has controlled that party for so long — but instead to dislodge it, and to win the Democratic Party base to an uncompromising struggle for economic justice, against all forms of oppression, for economic democracy, for a society of the free and the equal.

Inseparable from that would be a strategic interweaving of electoral action with non-electoral social

movements and popular struggles — in the communities, in the streets, wherever such struggles take us — against all forms of oppression and for multiple improvements in the quality of life for each and every person. This would culminate in a break at some point from the capitalist powerhouses and acolytes that dominate the Democratic Party, winning the majority sectors of the base away from the elite of upper-class mis-leaders.

Also essential would be a coherent and overarching political program — involving a set of practical policy proposals — to be implemented in order to transform the United States.

A partial model for such a program might be the detailed *Freedom Budget for All Americans*, put forward in 1966 by A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Michael Harrington, Martin Luther King Jr. and others. It projected, within a 10-year period, the elimination of poverty and unemployment in the United States, with universal health care, quality education and educational opportunities available to all people, and decent housing ensured to all, as a matter of right.

Our social and economic infrastructure — roads, bridges, public transportation, parks, libraries, hospitals — would have been improved and expanded as never before. Growing environmental and ecological concerns were also incorporated into the plan for rebuilding of our economy and society. Cultural opportunities, individual creativity, and personal development for all were to be encouraged and greatly enhanced.

DSA would not only provide invaluable guidance for its candidates and elected officials in developing a modern variant of such a program, but it would be performing an immense service to the great majority of our people, a path forward for the regeneration of our society in a manner consistent with socialist democracy.

This brings us to the issue of accountability. There are two questions.

- If DSA actually integrates electoral work into a strategic and programmatic orientation, what structures would help elected socialists resist establishment pressures and remain true to the agreed-upon programmatic and strategic orientation of socialist democracy?
- One can assume that DSA members and candidates would reject, with contempt, the notion: “Vote for me and I’ll set you free.” As Marx emphasized, people’s liberation must come from self-emancipation, not through some “condescending savior.” What would be the structures to ensure the accountability of an elected socialist to the people?

On key questions of strategy and accountability, answers must be developed soon. Powerful forces of the establishment are mobilizing to deflect or dilute the growing socialist challenge.

P.S.

* Socialist Worker, July 4, 2018:

<http://socialistworker.org/2018/07/04/socialists-aoc-and-the-democratic-party>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 45224), [The Left in the US: What can we do with the Democrats?](#).

[2] <https://www.justicedemocrats.com>

[3] <http://socialistworker.org/2018/07/02/the-pro-immigrant-majority-in-the-streets>

[4] <https://socialismconference.org/sched/>

[5] ESSF (article 45233), [United States, the Left & elections: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Transformational Vision](#).

[6] <http://socialistworker.org/2013/03/15/a-niche-in-the-system>

[7] <http://socialistworker.org/2018/01/24/left-inside-the-chicago-machine>