

INTRODUCTION: AMERICA'S NEW LEFT

At the height of Occupy in 2011, few would have guessed that the next destination for America's emerging new left would be the Democratic Socialists of America. Formed in 1982, the 6,000-odd DSA spent the next three decades as a marginal left caucus within a Democratic Party bankrolled by Wall Street, Hollywood and Silicon Valley; which, once in power, forced through NAFTA, spearheaded workfare, deregulated the banks, cosseted the tech giants, launched wave upon wave of military assaults on the greater Middle East and expanded state surveillance and drone warfare. The 'realignment' strategy favoured by DSA leader Michael Harrington and his co-thinkers had no discernible impact on political reality. Like the wider progressive milieu inside the Democratic 'big tent', DSA endorsed pro-war, pro-business candidates like John Kerry, once official nomination had been secured. The group managed to perpetuate itself over time, but little more. Since 2016, energized by the Sanders campaign and Black Lives Matter, repulsed by Trump, a new cohort of radicalized young Americans have flocked to join. DSA now claims 60,000 members, with chapters in all but one of fifty states, from Anchorage to Fort Lauderdale, Honolulu to Cape Cod. Roughly the same size as Momentum in the UK, the new DSA is notably more radical and dynamic, with many of its members eager to envisage an organization beyond the dark planet of the Democratic Party; a parallel move would be unthinkable now for Momentum. For the time being, both face the dilemma of operating in a political space largely determined by structures and ideologies alien, if not actively antagonistic, to a free-spirited left: deference to archaic and undemocratic national-constitutional forms, parochial myopia about neo-imperial policies abroad, unwillingness to draw a clear line under the experience of Blair and Brown, Clinton and Obama—and Biden. The presentations that follow, given at the UCLA Center for Social Theory and Comparative History in March 2019, don't break with these taboos. But the five DSA members, all from California chapters—and spanning a range of positions, from neo-Kautskian electoralism to libertarian party-building—offer a vivid sense of the debates agitating the group's membership base. How will DSA convert its newly acquired supporters into political organizers? What fields of activity should it bestow its (still limited) resources upon? Most pressingly, how should it relate to the Sanders 2020 campaign, and to the Democratic Party as a whole? Can the long-term goal of building an independent working-class party be reconciled with DSA's current practice of running candidates on Democratic ballot-lines? The manner in which these questions are addressed will help determine whether DSA's growth since 2016 sows the seeds for a lasting socialist revival in the world's most powerful capitalist state.

JEREMY GONG

America's New Left—1

Voting and Class Struggle

IN 2016, THE BERNIE Sanders campaign reintroduced the idea of socialism into the US political mainstream. The Democrat establishment stifled it and put forward Clinton, as the only alternative to an extreme right-wing agenda. After Trump's election, and the concomitant discrediting of the DP establishment, many turned towards democratic socialism. Fifty thousand—mostly young people—have joined the Democratic Socialists of America. But the more DSA matures, the more challenging are the strategic questions we confront. I'll focus mostly on the role of elections for our movement: despite the dangers of electoralism, a class-struggle approach to elections and elected office is an essential element of DSA's work today.

Socialists are trying to achieve the most difficult thing humans have ever attempted: the conscious transformation from one social order to another, carried out by, and in the interests of, the majority of society. Capitalists have incredible powers to maintain the status quo and, unless workers are organized, they have very little power. But organizing is difficult and often ends in failure. Even the highest points of class struggle, such as the 1930s and 40s in the US, have been fleeting. Organizations and working-class consciousness dissipate after major defeats, or are co-opted by the DP; workers have been divided by racism, sexism and other reactionary ideologies; older generations of militant organizers have died off. Yet only organized socialists can consolidate the gains of class struggle, assimilate the lessons of the international working class and bring these to a new generation. We cannot simply elect socialists to office, to legislate socialism from above. The state under capitalism is not a neutral tool; its legislators and administrators are under immense pressure to advance a pro-business agenda, to block or water down progressive reforms. Capitalists' control over investment decisions grants them an indirect structural power over the decisions of elected public officials. Second, though the redistribution of resources will require an ambitious legislative agenda, the power to achieve and defend those gains will depend primarily on organized workers and their capacity to mobilize a mass social base.

That said, the last three years have demonstrated the power of elections and elected socialists to advance socialist ideas and inspire workers

themselves to organize. To understand why, we should first appreciate how low the level of working-class organization and consciousness has fallen during the last forty years. Whereas at the high water-mark of class struggle in the 1930s and 40s, millions took part in strikes each year, in 2017, as few as 25,000 workers took part in major work stoppages. The neoliberal assault on unions and the left had all but erased class politics from the American political lexicon. This puts socialists today in a very different strategic conjuncture to that of the mid-20th century, when European social-democratic leaders and the Roosevelt Administration in the us set out to channel high levels of working-class militancy, represented by mass strikes and general social upheaval, into more easily contained collective-bargaining regimes.

In today's context, Sanders's campaign has been an effort to raise the political consciousness and activity of millions of workers. Even though his platform might be largely indistinguishable from those of the 20th-century social democrats, it plays a different role—one that Bhaskar Sunkara has called 'class-struggle social democracy'. Along with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, Sanders represents an approach to electoral politics that can help advance the socialist cause. First, by winning office and campaigning for a radical legislative agenda, these class-struggle social democrats have given people a sense that more is possible, beyond the confines of neoliberalism and austerity. They are helping to raise the expectations of the working class, rather than lowering them, as the 20th-century social democrats did. Sanders and others have inspired masses of people to become interested in politics for the first time. The clearest example of this is Ocasio-Cortez's drive to popularize the Green New Deal. As a new socialist Congressperson, Ocasio-Cortez was able to team up with young activists and put a working-class solution to the climate crisis in the national spotlight—something climate campaigners had been unable to do for years.

Second, this politicization builds on a continuous process of political education. Sanders regularly points out that billionaires like Jeff Bezos are to blame for poverty, homelessness and ecological destruction. He takes a clear stance against the Republicans' racism and sexism, urging workers to recognize their shared interests as against those of the business elite and their politicians. Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez have both made clear that without a mass movement of 'people versus money', outside the halls of power, their reform agenda will be out of reach—encouraging a new generation to take part in politics and activism. Third, by aiming their fire at the billionaires and corporations, Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez have eroded the legitimacy of the corporate-backed Democratic Party. This is not to say I agree with their orientation towards the Democrats: both seem committed to reforming or re-aligning the Party, instead of engineering a break from it. However, by raising class consciousness, bringing a new generation of workers to political activism and popularizing anti-corporate policies like the Green New Deal, class-struggle social democrats have begun to

highlight the DP's contradictions, while creating a viable political space outside and to the left of it. Finally, by re-introducing the idea of socialism into the American mainstream, Sanders has encouraged a sub-set of these newly politicized layers to develop explicitly anti-capitalist ideas. Young people are becoming radicalized, joining organizations like DSA, learning about the labour movement and getting jobs in strategic sectors like teaching, nursing and logistics, as part of a broader rank-and-file strategy for re-igniting working-class militancy from below.

Two recent examples illustrate ways in which a class-struggle approach to elections can be mutually reinforcing, and not opposed to, social-movement organizing outside the state. In West Virginia, the teachers who would go on to become leading organizers of the 2018 public-education strikes had been inspired to join DSA, thanks in part to their work during the 2016 Sanders campaign. It was during his run for the Democratic nomination that these activists built the skills and networks that helped Sanders spread the same ideas that would undergird the teachers' strike: working-class solidarity, redistribution from the corporations and the ultra-rich to the majority, the need for movement-building from below. The DSA members and teachers who helped lead the strike popularized the call to fund teachers' demands through a tax on the rich and on gas companies, as against the unions' insistence that the state legislature should pay for it with cuts to other services.

In California, the East Bay DSA played a major role in supporting the Oakland teachers' strike. Our DSA chapter had two important capacities to offer. One was a group of Oakland teachers who were also socialists and DSA members, most of them new to the left in the last few years. These teachers, supported by DSA's impressive network of experienced union activists, all became excellent organizers through the strike. The chapter was also able to mobilize hundreds of its members to support the strike in myriad ways: feeding thousands of students who relied on free or reduced-cost school lunches, so they didn't need to cross the picket lines; supporting the pickets directly; producing propaganda supporting the strike, including our own publication, *Majority*. None of this would have been possible had the East Bay chapter not built up its skills and networks over the course of a year-long electoral struggle in support of Proposition 10 and our local class-struggle candidate, Jovanka Beckles, for the State Assembly.

In conclusion: of course Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez are not revolutionary socialists, nor are they accountable to DSA. But they are helping to make favourable terrain for the socialist movement. By building the campaign behind Sanders for 2020, DSA can build its own independent capacity to wage class struggle, while bringing its politics to millions of workers. Over the medium term, this sets the stage for a revival of working-class resistance, while socialist ideas increasingly take root in real struggles.

SARAH MASON

America's New Left—2

Challenging Capital

THE EXPLOSIVE GROWTH of DSA is an extraordinary development. The United States has not seen a socialist organization this large since the Communist Party of the 1940s, and perhaps none as dynamic since the Debsian Socialist Party of the early 20th century. We are currently experiencing the largest strike wave in over a generation; for under-35s, socialism polls more favourably than capitalism; and the most popular politician in the US unapologetically identifies as a democratic socialist. In a moment so charged with radical potential, it is all the more imperative that we soberly assess the differences within the DSA about where to allocate our resources and what types of political activity will most effectively advance our goals. Focusing on our relationship to electoral strategy, Sanders and the Democratic Party allows us to think through an emerging, though productive, tension within the DSA, coalescing around the question: what form or mode of politics is best suited to develop and equip the working class with the power it needs to challenge the rule of capital?

In response to this question, a dominant tendency in the group, shaped by Sanders's success in 2016, remains convinced that popular socialist politicians are the only viable vehicle through which working-class power can be organized and a socialist programme achieved. I disagree with this position, and I want to think through this disagreement by looking at the recent debate around DSA's endorsement of Sanders, and some of the practical activity that DSA chapters in California have been involved in over the past year.

As a starting point, take the statement by DSA National Political Committee member Ella Mahony, in her recent debate with Dan La Botz in *New Politics*. Supporting DSA endorsement of Sanders, Mahony writes:

By participating in the Bernie movement, we can multiply our forces, meet and build relationships with people who can run as socialist candidates at every level, plug in to labour for Bernie, work to overcome the separation between labour and socialists, and transform DSA into something rooted in neighbourhoods and workplaces of all kinds.¹

At first glance, who could disagree—who wouldn't want a world where socialist politics are embedded in every neighbourhood and workplace? The problem, however, is in thinking through how one form of activity—electoral

organizing around Sanders—translates into the kind of mass militant organization that we envision. It is often argued that Sanders provides a platform for the kinds of policies that would constitute the minimum of any socialist programme, carrying a message of class-struggle politics to all who will listen. From this, workers will come to understand their real conditions, and can begin to fight back accordingly. By this logic, the millions who voted for Bernie Sanders already constitute the base of an emerging socialist alternative. But how are these millions organized, in any way other than to fleetingly demonstrate their power as an aggregate on election day?

Electoral organizing as a primary mode of politics is incapable of building the type of power required to fundamentally shift the balance of forces away from the global capitalist class. This does not mean we shouldn't vote, run candidates or push for legislative reform—nor does it mean we shouldn't endorse Sanders. But it does mean we should have a clear understanding of just how far these activities can take us. To give a concrete example. Sanders got a lot of credit last year for forcing Amazon to raise its minimum wage to \$15 an hour—a change that affected over 250,000 employees and tens of thousands of seasonal workers. The raise came after Sanders's introduction of the Stop Bad Employers by Zeroing Out Subsidies Act, otherwise known as the Stop BEZOS Act. A narrative began to take hold, from Fox and MSNBC to the *Nation* and *Jacobin*: in a battle between Sanders and Bezos, Sanders had won. As Micah Uetricht wrote in *Jacobin*: 'Today's announcement from Amazon shows precisely why denunciations of the rich, preferably by name, on a very large national public platform, by a public figure, and in concert with a working-class movement, are a very good idea.'

I couldn't agree more about the desirability of denunciations of the rich by public figures, but with which working-class movement is Sanders working in concert? Since the wage increase, employees at Whole Foods, purchased by Amazon in 2017, have experienced widespread scheduling cuts that have reduced shifts across many stores, often negating wage gains for employees. In Illinois, part-time employee hours were cut from an average of 30 to 21 hours a week, and full-time employee hours reduced from 37.5 to 34.5 hours. One worker said: 'We just have to work faster to meet the same goals in less time.'² Sanders was successful in pressuring Amazon to raise its wages, but now that hours are being slashed, what institutional power and networks of solidarity can these workers draw on to fight back? More importantly for DSA, what organizational energy and resources have we devoted to building these networks? It is one thing to acknowledge the necessity of a working-class movement, but quite another to do the work required to build it. Organizing your co-workers to walk

¹ Ella Mahony, Dan La Botz, 'Should DSA Endorse Bernie Sanders? A Debate', *New Politics*, 4 March 2019.

² 'Whole Foods Cuts Workers' Hours After Amazon Introduces Minimum Wage', *Guardian*, 6 March 2019.

off the job, risking loss of pay or worse, or convincing your neighbours to withhold their rent until certain repairs are made, takes a different kind of organizing than encouraging someone to check a box. The stakes feel higher; the risks are more immediate.

The types of labour actions that DSA finds itself participating in—like the teachers' strikes—are the result of a decades-long project to transform the teachers' unions from top-down bureaucratic appendages of the Democratic Party to bottom-up worker organizations. The call that has underpinned these strikes—'Fighting for the schools our students deserve'—was not born out of the Sanders campaign in 2016, but out of rank-and-file teachers, parents and students organizing in Chicago in 2011. A large part of what made the recent strikes possible was rank-and-file insistence on not diverting energy towards the kind of electoral precinct work to which the labour movement has historically been relegated. They sought to build a different form of power—and so should we.

While a small number of DSA members are rank-and-file teachers, a large portion of our members toil in workplaces and sectors that are non-unionized. The DSA can play a central role in organizing our own workplaces, to build the power of the class at the point of production—and reproduction. The unionization effort at Anchor Steam Brewing in San Francisco is a prime example of what this can look like. Our organization can also encourage and support members who take jobs in sectors like warehousing, logistics, service work, gig work, and even tech—an extremely interesting arena where there's actually a tremendous amount of organizing going on. Members of DSA in the Tech Workers' Coalition have launched successful campaigns against Google's contracts with the Department of Defense and Department of Homeland Security, as well as walk-outs against sexist treatment of women.

In California, DSA's housing work further demonstrates the need to move beyond an electoral conception of mass politics. Prior to the November 2018 elections, DSA chapters throughout the state took part in mass canvassing around Proposition 10, a ballot initiative that would expand rent protection for tenants. Much of this work was coalitional, with groups like ACCE taking the lead.³ In practice, it amounted to hundreds of enthusiastic DSA members going door to door, encouraging atomized individuals to 'Vote Yes on 10'. While this work was important, and allowed tenants to share their frustrations with DSA members, it is less clear what kind of lasting capacity was built. In Santa Cruz, our DSA chapter engaged in similar work around a local rent-control initiative, Measure M. When it failed by a large margin, we realized that very little had been done to organize tenants. What remained was a list of anonymous email addresses, which now get blasted whenever the City Council discusses housing. Contrary to

³Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment.

popular belief, access to this data has not resulted in the kind of upheaval necessary to thwart the aspirations of a well-organized landlord class. I raise this point because it has been argued—by DSA’s New York electoral working group, among others—that we should build our own email lists and data while canvassing, in order to avoid the historic problem with this type of organizing: that we compile the data but, at the end of the day, the candidate’s office gets to keep it. But building an email list does not easily translate into building the kind of militancy, trust and collectivity that’s needed to beat back the landlords and the cops.

By contrast, East Bay DSAers working under the banner of TANC—Tenants and Neighbourhood Councils—put forward a different model of tenant organizing, alongside the Prop. 10 campaign. TANC’s conception of tenant struggle differs from that of the more electorally oriented DSA members in that it conceives of tenants’ power as their ability ultimately to withhold their rent. Like workers’ ability to collectively withhold their labour, renters can use this collective threat to win gains from their landlord. The type of organizing required to build this capacity can easily lend itself to electoral action, when appropriate, whereas the inverse just isn’t the case. In Oakland, TANC has successfully organized 41 buildings operated by a single landlord, in order to pressure her to change her sub-tenant policy, which required new tenants to pay three times the market rate. The Los Angeles Tenants’ Union has also used the rent strike as a weapon against landlords, with some measure of success. These types of organizing efforts should drive DSA’s activity, since they ready the working class to take the kind of action that will be required to build the socialist future we desire.

What kinds of power do we need to build to increase our class’s ability to challenge the rule of capital where we live, work and play? Electoral activity does not mechanically translate into the types of self-organization needed to advance even a minimal socialist programme. The New Deal would not have been possible without the massive strike waves and workplace occupations that preceded it. What organizations will apply that kind of pressure to ensure a truly radical Green New Deal is passed? What will DSA do to avoid resurrecting the sort of email-list politics that characterized the anti-war movement during the Bush era—to prevent DSA becoming a move-on.org for the Twitter generation? How do we ensure that our activity not only brings people closer to DSA, but involves them in a type of politics that goes beyond just voting? These are the sorts of questions that should guide our strategic orientation towards whatever activity we engage in—the Sanders campaign, labour organizing, tenant organizing, anti-racist organizing, or any of the other political projects that DSA members are involved in.

MAGALLY MIRANDA ALCÁZAR

America's New Left—3

The Weakest Link

THE DSA'S STRAW POLL about whether or not to endorse Sanders in 2020 offers a useful way to map the different political currents within the organization. Full disclosure: I voted 'yes' to endorsement, but it is perhaps a different kind of 'yes' to others in the DSA. In some ways, it puts me closer to those who voted 'no', as a protest vote. I'd like to explore some of the issues a 'no' vote was trying to raise, and the understandable scepticism and criticisms it represented, as well as explaining why I still, nevertheless, voted yes. First, we need to be realistic about the key differences between a 2020 Sanders campaign and the campaign of 2016. The field is a lot more crowded now. The Democratic Party is scrambling for recuperation, and there are lots of progressive candidates. We can call AOC and Bernie Sanders 'class-struggle social democrats', but at the end of the day, in key moments where there could be a rupture with the Democratic Party, they're not prepared to do that.

Second, there's an element of fantasy in the idea that a Sanders presidency is akin to Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party. When we talk about a Corbyn premiership in the UK, it's in the context of an active party membership behind him, as well as the support of the largest labour unions. As those in the 'no' camp have been saying, there's no equivalent here with a Sanders presidency. Third, the widespread comparisons of the Sanders campaign and the Green New Deal to FDR and the 1930s New Deal strike me as quite naive about the actuality of the Roosevelt presidency. While the original New Deal was probably the best social-welfare state we've had in the US, it created a realignment in the Democratic Party that had mixed results for the working class. Militant sit-down strikes were put down once the CIO got established. In the field of domestic work, the new coalition that emerged around this Democratic realignment had a catastrophic effect on black women in the South who were domestic workers as well as agricultural workers. Some of this history gets washed over when we talk about a Sanders presidency and a Green New Deal.

Finally, there's a notion that doing work in the electoral sphere is somehow equated with power. You hear this over and over in the discourse around 'class-struggle social democracy'. It's about 'giving power' to the workers' movement—an election equals class consciousness. An extreme example would be Meaghan Day's recent article in *Jacobin*, where she talks about all the things that a President Sanders could do without support in

Congress, all the reforms he could pass through executive power. It's a way of thinking about politics as an imperial presidency, where popular power gets deflated into something like a popular mandate. Where does 'from below' grand power come from, after that happens? I don't know.

All that said, I do see an argument for a 'yes' vote to the DSA's support for a Sanders candidacy—with the caveat that the electoral sphere is the weak point of the state. This also matters in terms of the growth of the DSA. Some think the membership surge took place because of the 2016 Sanders campaign. I personally didn't join the DSA during the Democratic Primaries, but after the election of Trump. I did so because the electoral sphere *is* the weak point of the state, but Trump's victory has emboldened the state's harder elements and their supporters—the police, the ICE, far-right groups. Trump represents the landlord class, which we saw in the fight for Proposition 10, is a powerful force in the US. Even if we had passed Prop 10, we weren't going to win comprehensive social housing.

What makes the Sanders campaign strategic is the way his programme has given voice to issues that matter—Medicare for all, free public higher education and the Green New Deal, combating the environmental catastrophe. These issues don't come out of thin air but are grounded in social movements. The rhetoric of the 2016 Sanders campaign often emerged from Occupy or the student movements. To the extent that there is a potential to pass a Green New Deal, it's coming from a galvanized movement of eco-socialists that includes many millennials who are scrambling to understand how we survive capitalism, as well as groups like the water protectors in Standing Rock. So: yes to endorsing the Sanders campaign, but only insofar as we understand it as a vehicle for continuing to raise up these movements which require slow, patient work and far exceed the electoral cycle.

ARIELLE SALLAI

America's New Left—4

Towards a Socialist Party

MY WORK IN DSA has focused on communications and the media, but I'm also concerned with the internal structure of our organization and how that is limiting our capacity to grow, beyond the last surge in membership. I'll use the internal workings of my chapter in Los Angeles as a primary example, because I think it's pretty similar to how other DSA chapters work—though perhaps the geography of Los Angeles itself has forced us to confront the limitations of our structure earlier than some others. Like the region itself, the membership of the DSA in Los Angeles is sprawling, and extends from Inglewood to Palmdale, and everywhere in between. Across such a huge space, it's hard to engage with all our members equally, though we should aspire to do so. However, most of our work is oriented around a set of committees that meet somewhere quite central, like Koreatown, every other week or so. These committees are typically issue-based. They were formed in quick succession after the big bump in membership following Trump's election. We had no by-laws or official process: if you wanted to organize something, you could just start doing it.

Because of this lawless period, we have a dizzying variety of committees. It can be a bit overwhelming for new members, but also exciting and energizing to see the range of work that we cover: housing and homelessness, electoral politics, prison abolition, healthcare, labour, climate justice, political education, mutual aid, immigration justice, membership, agitation and propaganda, and even a working group to stop the LA 2028 Olympics. If you want to organize something else outside of a committee, that's also pretty easy to do. You just need 25 members to put a proposal to the Steering Committee. If it's in line with DSA's values and requires limited resources, they may approve it. If the Steering Committee doesn't approve, with yet another 25 members signing on, it can be taken to a chapter-wide vote. This means it's fairly easy to work on virtually anything you want in DSA-LA—and to join a large slate of projects and committees that are essentially competing with each other for resources.

That can be problematic, for several reasons. To be an effective organization, our committees should be working together toward a shared vision for a better Los Angeles, not competing against each other for members and resources. We should aim to be more strategic, but also deeply participatory—a top-down structure is not the answer. The committee system also has a tendency to create activists, not organizers. Ice breakers at

chapter-run events are often: ‘What committee are you in?’—essentially, ‘What is your passion project?’; but our passion project should be socialism. Organizing around housing justice or labour are just tactics, or pressure points, to build working-class power to get us there. But also, crucially, this internal structure is inaccessible for most working-class people, and results in recruiting more and more of the same types of members: people who found us online, who are passionate about a particular issue and available to attend endless planning meetings, far from where they live or work. Those members are more likely to be downwardly-mobile millennials from middle-class backgrounds, white and male.

To change this, we need a real membership-building strategy, and we need to meet people where they’re at. We have to organize at the neighbourhood level, and actually ask people to join us. If we hope to have millions of members, we can’t rely on passive-recruitment strategies, and people can’t just be funnelled into issue-based committees. Not that we should eliminate issue-based committees entirely, but we should recognize them as places in which to deliberate and refine our policy positions, not as the predominant site of DSA work. At the same time, we should be careful not to make a false dichotomy, whereby the neighbourhood is the place where decisions are carried out, and not where they are made. The neighbourhood should be another place where we are articulating our demands.

At DSA-Los Angeles we’re moving closer to this kind of model. At our last annual convention, we passed a resolution to build branches—and now we have three: Central LA, the Westside and the San Fernando Valley. Our general meetings are now held simultaneously across these branches, so members don’t have to drive across town to attend them. We’ve appointed branch leadership, and they’re beginning to discuss how our committees can localize their work. For example, the Westside branch recently connected with the Westside local of the LA Tenants Union, via our housing and homelessness committee, to support direct action against a landlord who’s trying to evict a long-term tenant in Venice. We also hold neighbourhood hangouts: social, low-key recruitment events in neighbourhoods across the county, including places like Santa Clarita, Palmdale, South LA and Pasadena that are outside our larger membership cores. With Proposition 10 to expand rent control in California last year, we held concurrent canvasses across the county, mirroring the locations where we hold hangouts and have a high concentration of members. It was a lot more work than hosting just one or two big canvasses every other week, but we built more capacity that way, making it easier for members to get involved and organize with their neighbours.

We’re still a long way from an entirely neighbourhood-based model, but we want to make sure we’re making changes deliberately, with buy-in from people across the chapter. In my view, DSA should aspire to be an organization that is more than just people who are already drawn to

activism. We should be an organization of the working class. Unfortunately, not everyone feels this way. Ultimately, all our debates in DSA come down to the question of whether you think the group itself can organize the working class towards revolution, or if it is just a temporary movement-building entity. I think DSA can and should be a revolutionary organization, but it can't become one until we address our internal structure and commit ourselves to the deliberate process of base building—which is to say that this is about politics as much as it is about structure. If we continue to orient our work exclusively towards the electoral and legislative arena, we will not be building the base we need to actually win. But we also risk irrelevance if we *don't* participate in the biggest platform for our movement, the Sanders 2020 campaign. We would be remiss to ignore all the media hype this offers. Media outlets are already turning to DSA for commentary on the election.

So DSA should definitely endorse Sanders, but use the campaign to foster more neighbourhood-based organizing. That's how we approached our work on Proposition 10, which was fairly successful. But in a recent report from Metro DC DSA's tenant-organizing and anti-eviction campaign, 'Stomp Out Slumlords', I caught wind of a sentiment I've been seeing a lot of. An excerpt from their statement addresses their own demographics compared to the tenants they meet in the buildings they organize:

We've never had much interest in recruiting tenants into the DSA. We don't try to hide our politics, or shy away from big-picture conversations, but strategically we think tenants could do a lot more good organizing in their buildings than coming to general meetings on the other side of town. This attitude has been re-enforced by our experience. We have succeeded when we have helped tenants build their own organizations in their own buildings. We have failed miserably when we have tried to get them to come to DSA events. At a theoretical level, growing the membership of the DSA is not as much a priority as growing our capacity to help working-class organization and struggle.

Later they continue:

Our main contribution has been what we may call organizational capacity, doing things like helping to write agendas, making sure people sign in to meetings, maintaining contact-lists, printing flyers and reminding people to do the thing they are committed to doing. Since we have some experience at organizing, we can make some suggestions about strategy, propose tactics people might not think of and bring in outside resources. We compose alternatives that tenants choose between; the tenants bring local knowledge, grievances that can become demands, networks of the friends and relatives they can mobilize and the will to fight.

The ‘Stomp Out Slumlords’ campaign is deeply impressive, but I would disagree with the way in which the authors of the report talk about themselves as distinct from the tenants that they’re organizing—as though the tenant associations they are building are entirely separate entities from the DSA chapter itself. I’m not sure everyone working on that campaign feels the same way, but these statements suggest they don’t think that the DSA can ever become an organization more representative of the working class. Rather, the group ultimately serves as a hub of activists who can help build working-class power elsewhere.

Given the inaccessibility of our general meetings and committee structure, of course they’ve had trouble getting tenants to come to DSA events. But that doesn’t mean they should write off the notion entirely. It’s disappointing to see so many DSA members averse to asking other people to join us, as if they see their own lives and struggles as somehow less working class. I would like to see DSA adopt a national tenant-organizing priority—with ‘tenant’ meaning anyone not in control over their housing, including the unhoused—so that if a town or city doesn’t have a tenants’ union, DSA can be the one to start it, as an explicit part of the chapter; dues to the tenants’ association would just be dues to the DSA. We need that kind of intentional membership-building work to truly grow—and grow on a strategic, neighbourhood level.

There’s much else in the Metro DC report that I very much agree with, particularly that DSA cannot be successful in recruiting people on the basis of pre-fabricated demands—that we should work together to formulate our demands from the bottom up. We’ll have far more success in gaining tenants based on of their current struggles than by convincing them to join a pre-defined movement for something like social housing, as much as we want it. There’s also no silver-bullet issue. Recruiting takes a lot of struggle and time. We found this with our Proposition 10 campaign, which we hoped would be a real base-building opportunity. But people aren’t going to join the first time we talk to them, nor the second. It takes three, four, many times. But I would say that DSA-LA’s work around Proposition 10 did contribute to a big wave of housing wins, in terms of rent caps and rent control across the country. So this was still movement-building, even if we didn’t recruit tons of tenants to our organization in the process.

Switching gears: we also need to pay attention to how DSA is perceived in the media and how we can leverage the attention we currently have to intervene in the political discourse in this country. This is where electoral politics really comes into play, purely as a tool to spread our message. But it’s also clear how little control we have in how DSA is presented by the media, not just because of how little accountability and control we have over our elected representatives, like AOC, but because of how ill-prepared DSA members are to speak on behalf of the organization.

Recently a cover story for *New York Magazine* got a lot of attention because it presented DSA in a non-serious way. The headline was, 'Pinkos Have More Fun: Socialism is AOC's calling card, Trump's latest rhetorical bludgeon, and a new way to date in Brooklyn'. There's nothing wrong with showing that we're young people who have fun, but our messaging should be focused on our shared struggles. Our members—even the downwardly mobile millennials—were drawn to the DSA because the economy is not working for them. The working class is not something that is external to us; it doesn't benefit us to write off our own struggles, whether in the workplace, at our apartment buildings, or with our student loans. We can recognize where we experience privilege without losing the heart of why we organize. To build a real working-class movement, we have to find the areas where we can bridge across differences and emphasise them—because the right is doing the opposite: they are exploiting people's fear of difference to justify austerity and exclusion.

Joining DSA, for me, was a transformative experience. I was never an activist before. I was more or less an armchair socialist—though not particularly well-read about tactics or theory. I was just a disenchanting worker, enraged by my gentrifying neighbourhood, who considered myself left of liberal, read a little Marxism in college, and went to Occupy, but never imagined myself becoming an active radical. Whether DSA becomes a revolutionary force in American politics remains an open question, but it's clear it has had a revolutionary impact on the lives of its active members. That should be at the centre of everything we do and say about our organization.

RENÉ CHRISTIAN MOYA

America's New Left—5

Risks of Co-option

AS WELL AS being a member of the Los Angeles chapter of the DSA, I'm also a volunteer organizer with the Los Angeles Tenants' Union, and a member of the School of Echoes—an autonomous collective of organizers reflecting on the conditions of the working class and poorer communities. I mention these other organizations not as a biographical curio, but because my political outlook over the past two years has been increasingly shaped by my work outside of DSA, helping to construct a mass tenants' movement. If there is a whiff of the outsider's perspective in my analysis and criticism, it is largely to do with my personal trajectory outside the DSA space, even though it has often been in parallel to changes within the organization.

To start by delineating what the DSA is not. It is not yet a mass organization in any meaningful sense. Its membership, while experiencing impressive growth, is still small—around 60,000 members in a country of 326 million people. Though a bit larger than Britain's Momentum, it exists in a country five times the size of the United Kingdom, and one in which a mass labour party does not exist. DSA's membership is also whiter, more middle-class and more male than the population at large. There has been an element of self-selection at play in the growth of the organization over the last three years, which is testament to a profound, if as yet still understated, crisis of American politics going back at least two decades. The DSA is also not a party—and quite far from being one. It cannot and does not field candidates on its own ballot line.

So, what *is* the DSA? Practically speaking, it is a collection of fairly autonomous chapters spread across much of the United States, with wildly different leadership structures and priorities, united under a national coordinating committee, the NPC, and managed by a small staff. A chapter's relationship to existing movements in a given community is largely dependent on the nature of the pre-existing relationships between activists in the chapter. For all the *Sturm und Drang* online about the organization's internal dramas, you'd be hard-pressed to find much meaningful factionalism at the worm's eye-level, at least in the LA chapter today. It is not that the DSA has no ideological faultlines, but that the open factionalism that does exist tends to turn on structural questions—of internal democracy and decision-making; of hierarchy, discipline and leadership; of process and flexibility, or the lack thereof; of 'horizontalism' versus centralization. The present looseness of the organization is in fact largely the by-product

of historical accident—the DSA’s rebirth in the aftermath of the 2016 election—and not of political principle.

Yet, such organizational matters cannot be separated from political questions. As a meeting-place of those disaffected by the collapse of liberal certainties, the DSA’s political character is far from settled. What, then, are the core political questions facing the group today? What does it mean to be a member? Are its structures and political culture meant to pre-figure its future role, or are they merely instrumental? Are we committed to the parliamentary road to democratic socialism, and to marching through the institutions, or to a strategic flexibility, depending on changing conditions? The primary question confronting the DSA is not the question of its relationship to the Democratic Party—not that this has been settled—but the narrower question that has temporarily subsumed it, of how the organization relates to the presidential candidacy of Sanders.

My concerns about endorsement have to do with the DSA’s limited resources, and with the efficacy of devoting too many of them to an independent campaign, when there will be a well-funded campaign outside of DSA, with its own enthusiastic volunteer field operation. I fear there will be calls in some quarters to set aside the difficult and important work of deep local organizing, in favour of an ephemeral canvassing strategy. I’m also sceptical of an election campaign’s ability to cohere a mass base under the DSA banner that persists, once election day is over.

I fear that will happen if Sanders loses—though this would present a dilemma for DSA whether or not we endorse him—but I also fear what will happen should he win. I’m cautiously optimistic about Sanders’ chances of winning, but this optimism informs my scepticism about how well DSA could survive a Sanders presidency. What happens when Sanders inevitably faces a backlash from organized capital and the political right against his more controversial policy ideas? If he doesn’t back down, will the Democratic Party stand alongside him in defence of his platform? And if Sanders *does* back down, how will DSA hold him accountable, much less the broader Democratic Party?

More importantly, what is the DSA trying to achieve through a Sanders Presidency? Those DSA members most strongly pushing for his candidacy seem to believe he can be a catalyst for an unprecedented explosion of political consciousness. I have no doubt that he has the potential to channel a generation of young activists into democratic-socialist politics. I am less clear about how the DSA intends to develop incoming members, such that a good proportion of them don’t simply melt away within a year of the election. Finally, at what point is the DSA willing to break with Sanders? This is an urgent question. How can we avoid the pitfalls of previous social-democratic experiments on far less propitious terrain than was faced by socialists in Europe and Latin America? Will the DSA be willing to

engage with him in power, more critically than movements abroad did in their moments of possibility?

Ultimately, the group's future isn't predicated on one-off membership surges tied to any one candidate, nor on rank electoralism—though it is necessary to contest in the electoral realm. Rather, the fate of this organization depends on whether or not it is willing to struggle with the working class where they are, and to do so with the intention of building roots in those communities over the long haul. The prospects of organized labour are vital to our chances of building hegemony around socialist demands. It is a task of the organized left, in DSA and beyond, to work towards the construction of sites of power independent of the political system, and of the existing infrastructure of progressivism—including the unions. We can only do so through direct and intentional engagement with worker and community struggles. This is arduous, time-consuming work. What does it look like? Most of my political work is around housing and gentrification, the city as a site for the extraction of value—because this is where capital in the developed world exists today, and where the working class increasingly confronts capital most viscerally, outside of the workplace itself. One of the most exciting developments over the last couple of years has been the slow emergence of labour as an actor in these community struggles. Even the recent UTLA teachers' strike, and the ongoing efforts of Unite Here to build community support for their campaigns, are reminders that the bosses we fight at work are the same bosses who own our homes.

We need unions in our workplace, but increasingly we also need them in our homes and our neighbourhoods, too. This is work that many DSA chapters across the country can involve themselves in right now, and some are. It will help build the skills, infrastructure and capacity necessary for the long-term health of our movement. If DSA is to expend a lot of time and energy on the election of Sanders, then it must do so while remaining wedded to programmatic demands, even transitional demands, against which our relationship with Sanders can be measured. Whether for the human right to housing, or a wholesale greening of the economy, we need to build and foster movements that will survive when we inevitably hit the limit of what the political system will bear.