

An Appeal for Dialectical Polemics: A Reply to Post and Smith

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In their recent article for *New Politics*, Charlie Post and Ashley Smith lay out what is a serious point of view within the socialist movement. I particularly agree with their insistence that the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) can play a critical role in supporting strikes and protests against pandemic conditions, even if they phrase it in such a way that one might believe this isn't already happening. Regardless, what matters most is to identify the point of commonality that can serve to foster joint work among socialist trends and this is one very important area that is an especially salient one at the moment.

As a polemic, the piece would have been more effective if they had engaged with a wider layer of the really-existing DSA or if they had narrowed their focus to Dustin Guastella's articles in *Jacobin*. Instead, they use Dustin as a straw man to paint "many socialists" with a broad brush and counterpose their own point of view to this ill-defined "many."

They argue it was a mistake to have endorsed Bernie Sanders, both because he never had any chance of winning (less important in their eyes) and because doing so will drag the socialist movement into a trap within the Democratic Party (more important). Nate Silver aside, their first point is a counterfactual that can't be proven (what would have happened without the coronavirus?), while there is truth to the danger they point to in their second point. But rather than engaging with potentials, they inappropriately pose absolutes.

In doing so, they avoid the central questions related to their polemic: Did Bernie's 2016 and 2020 campaign build the left? Did his popularization of socialism and class politics help shift consciousness to the left? Did a socialist winning over the plurality of a whole new generation to anti-capitalist ideas and language make strikes more likely and contribute to the wildcat strike wave we see today? Yes or no?

If the answer is yes, then they should concede a point to their opponents. If the answer is no, then they should begin by saying “we did not endorse Sanders and DSA was wrong to do so, as it was wrong to endorse AOC, Tlaib, etc. in 2018. DSA should retract its endorsement for them in 2020.” By ducking that question, they open themselves to obvious lines of attack at the level of polemics.

Leaving the structure of their argument aside, once those questions are answered, there can be a comradely debate about limitations, unintended consequences, real obstacles, etc. And Charlie and Ashley are not wrong to stress the traps and obstacles facing our movement. But to avoid those questions and dismiss the last few years of socialist electoral challenges as “exceptions” weakens their argument. Of course they are exceptions, given our starting point. But what incredible exceptions they are, and what can we make of them? Those are the live questions we all face.

They conclude their piece by suggesting that DSA should adopt “the revolutionary left’s call for a working-class party independent of the Democrats.” I agree, but they leave aside the fact that most of the active base of DSA also supports building such a party. Again, they differentiate themselves at the level of self-definition as opposed to assessing the empirical question of what is working and what is not working.

Dirty Break

There is a genuine argument about how and when and with whom this party can be built. That is what political organizational questions will be about in the coming 1-5-10 years over a whole range of opinion and strategy. This is a live debate, the conclusions to which really can lead either towards a new party or back into the Democratic Party.

But rather than seizing on the common goal of building a new party and then offering real proposals for how to lay a basis for it, they dismiss one approach to getting such a party (the dirty break) as “utopian.” This sets up a polemical sleight of hand in which they argue that the ballot line strategy has “led many back to the old realignment strategy that they initially rejected.” Their evidence? Dustin Guastalla’s articles in *Jacobin* and a single tweet from *Jacobin* publisher Bhaskar Sunkara. I will let comrades who are actively building DSA decide for themselves if this is a fair judgement.

I will concede the point that the dirty break has undoubtedly led *some* people back to realignment (or to realignment for the first time more likely), *if* Charlie and Ashley will concede that the dirty break approach (we can argue if it is a strategy or a tactic) has led many *more* people to see the need for a new party. And if I’m right about the *some* and the *more*, shouldn’t we conclude that the *more* is what we want if we are to accumulate the human material for a new party?

I respect Charlie and Ashley tremendously and they will continue to play important roles in building a socialist movement capable of winning over millions of workers to fight for their own freedom. However, I would appeal to them to shift the terrain of their arguments (not stifle or hide or soften them) from polarizing a debate over whether one should attempt to build a new party outside the Democratic Party or whether the dirty break is part of the solution (as I believe it is for the conditions we face today). Frankly, that horse has left the barn.

Why not instead focus on putting forward practical proposals for how their political current can work with others to contribute to getting the party we all want? If I’m not wrong, I believe their answer centers on building struggle from below and exclusively running independent candidates where possible. This outlook provides ample room for joint work and common assessments of successes, failures, and misfires.

In terms of how to conduct debates, to the degree that there is a polemic to be had over realignment

and other questions, they ought to sharpen their focus and more closely define their polemical targets. Setting up straw men (Dustin stands in for “many”) and relying on the “logical conclusion” (“dirty break has led many back”) method rarely win over anyone who isn’t already convinced.

I know for a fact that I have failed more than once to heed my own advice about carefully and generously approaching polemics among comrades, and no one should get too bent out of shape about a single polemic. However, I believe the movement will benefit from looking for the best in each other’s arguments in this period (a period in which we will all face challenges for which we are not prepared) while raising the theoretical level of our real disagreements to the level of practice.