

Building the Party Through Struggle: A Response to French and Gong

The Black-led multiracial working-class uprising has radically changed US and global politics. It has become the outlet for all the rage built up by years of racist police violence, institutional racism,



and the impoverishment of working people. These mass militant protests, which have swept through big cities and small towns in every corner of the country and stirred similar actions throughout the world, have won more victories in a short space of time than years of electoral campaigns for politicians inside the Democratic Party.

The movement has cohered around the demand, pioneered by Black abolitionists, to defund the police and reinvest in communities of color, social services, education, healthcare and jobs. It has forced both capitalist parties, and the capitalist class as a whole, on to the defensive, forcing them to tear down statues of slave holders and conquistadors, cut the budgets of police departments, and in the case of Minneapolis go so far as to promise to disband the entire force. Black and white militants in the labor movement have seized the opportunity to stage solidarity strikes, demand that unions and union federations expel the so-called police unions from their midst, and King County Labor Council just voted to do so.

This new political context frames our response to Nick French and Jeremy Gong's article, "Why We Need a Political Party." Written before the uprising, it defends the "Dirty Break"

strategy—preparing for an independent worker’s party primarily by running socialist candidates inside Democratic Party. We believe that this strategy was mistaken before the uprising and is now out completely out of step with the new political period we have entered. Against this perspective, we argue that a new working-class party will be built primarily through mass struggles like the current uprising and the strikes and workplace demonstrations that took place amidst the pandemic, and through running candidates locally on independent ballot lines as a complement to, not substitute for, these struggles from below.

Points of Convergence

Despite our sharp differences, we find common ground with French and Gong. We agree that Bernie Sanders’ campaign had an enormous impact on mass consciousness. We also agree that the campaign ended disastrously with Sanders capitulating to the establishment and according to French and Wong, “destroying much of the organization and momentum his campaign built.”

We share French and Gong’s rejection of the realignment strategy to transform the Democratic Party into a new workers party. History has demonstrated, time and again, that is a dead end. The Democratic Party is entirely controlled by its corporate donors, party bureaucracy, and elected officials—not its unorganized members. We too think that we need to build a new party, a mass workers party, whose purpose is to lead struggle, run candidates on its own ballot line, politically educate worker activists, and fight for socialism. Finally, we support their argument that DSA is the primary vehicle to advance that project, and their call for DSA to spearhead discussions among socialists and workers organization about forming a new workers party.

The Dynamics of Radicalization

However, we disagree with French and Gong over the fundamental question of how working-class and oppressed people radicalize.

As admirers of pre-1914 socialism, French and Gong appear to believe that class consciousness is shaped, "from the outside" by a party whose main activity is electoral campaigns. They are quite explicit that the Sanders' campaigns of 2016 and 2020 generated a new radicalization in US society.

There are two problems with this contention—one theoretical and the other historical. First, we do not believe that workers and oppressed people primarily move to the left through parties and elections that provide them a program from above. Rather, popular radicalism is the product of mass, disruptive and often illegal class struggle and social movements. In the course of struggle, workers and oppressed people create their own organizations to fight for change, build new solidarities amongst themselves, challenge capitalist "common sense," win reforms, gain confidence to fight for increasingly left-wing demands, and become a "class for itself."

The Civil Rights Movement is a case in point. It began over the moderate demand for integration and radicalized to challenge the racist foundations of US capitalism and imperialism. Today's uprising started over protesting the racist police murder of George Floyd but rapidly adopted the abolitionist demand to defund the police.

Electoral campaigns whose sole aim is to win office have a very different and more conservative logic. To win, all that a campaign needs to do is get out 50 percent plus one. No risks have to be taken, no new coalitions have to be built and more radical demands are actually counter-productive. These campaigns and their candidates usually adopt the "lowest common denominator" positions – those that are palatable to the largest, passive electoral constituencies.

While mass social struggles can transform consciousness on a mass scale, politicians and their campaigns tail behind them, rather than lead on their issues. For example, Sanders opposes

the uprising's demand to defund the police, opposes their abolition, and has merely offered the standard liberal program for police reform with slightly more radical rhetoric. Sanders' position highlights the dramatic contrast between moderating nature of electoral campaigns, especially ones inside a capitalist party, and the radicalizing nature of mass movements from below.

Sanders as an Expression not Cause of the Radicalization

The second problem with French and Gong's position is historical – their contention that Sanders was the source of the mass radicalization. We believe this gets cause and effect backwards. Sanders' two presidential campaigns were in fact the *product* of far deeper dynamics. They were made possible by the combination of nearly four decades of neoliberal attacks on workers and oppressed people, compounded by the Great Recession of 2008.

These conditions led to the surge in the popularity of socialism *well before* Bernie Sanders ran for President. In the aftermath of the financial crisis and the election of Barack Obama, *Newsweek* announced on their cover in February 2009, "We're All Socialists Now." Of course, all it meant by "socialism" was the state bailout of failing corporations and the stimulus plan, but it nevertheless is an indicator of socialism's new-found popularity, which has held steady at about 50 percent of young people since 2010.

Even more important to shaping this leftward shift was the wave of struggles in the aftermath of the Great Recession. These have shaped the world view of an entire generation. The Arab Spring set an example of popular revolution; the Madison Uprising provided us a glimpse of class struggle in the US; Occupy gave us the popular language of class with its slogan of the 99 percent against the 1 percent; the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) reversed the decades of union retreats and blazed

the path of social justice unionism with its 2012 strike against “apartheid schools”; and Black Lives Matter protests swept the country in 2014. Combined with widespread disappointment with the Obama administration’s promise of change, these militant struggles from below fertilized the ground from which Sanders’ sudden popularity and his presidential campaign of 2016 grew.

Moreover, these ongoing struggles forced Sanders far to the left in 2016. A longtime supporter of police unions, the movement for Black lives forced him to adopt and voice positions against racism and police brutality. Similar pressures from below compelled him to foreground women’s rights and demands of LGBTQ folks, shifting him to connect the fight against oppression to his “broad class” demands like Medicare for All and the Green New Deal.

Sanders adoption of these so-called “fringe demands” did not undercut his popularity as Dustin Guastella has argued. Instead, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor points out, Sanders was not aggressive enough in putting them forward, especially those against racism and police brutality, for fear of alienating more conservative voters. This is not a mistake, but the unfortunate logic of top-down election campaigns, especially those conducted in a capitalist party, whose main goal is winning office.

Mis-crediting Sanders for Generating Class and Social Struggle Since 2016

French and Gong double down on these claims about Sanders role when they “attribute the historically small but still-significant rise in class struggle in the United States from 2015-2020 to the fact that Sanders essentially ran a permanent campaign during those years.” In making this case, they tend to ignore the independent initiative of workers, the long term organizing that lay behind the upsurges, and the labor organizations, radical networks, and deep traditions that were

as, if not *more important* than the Sanders campaign.

French and Gong's analysis of the red state teachers strikes hinges on the role of the Sanders 2016 campaign. While some of the militants in West Virginia and Arizona may have been brought together by the 2016 Sanders campaign, their organizing was far more deeply rooted. In all the states, teacher militants had built up networks through a variety of efforts over years of work—networks were far more important for the strikes than the Sanders campaign. These networks relied on support and training not from the Sanders campaign, but from *Labor Notes* and militant trade unionists.

In the case of Arizona, its leaders drew on the experience and lessons of the CTU strike of 2012, in which one of their leaders, Rebecca Garelli, had participated as a teacher in Chicago. These militants learned to defy the union officialdom and take minority actions to build confidence from these organizers, examples, and traditions, not the Sanders campaign.

A similar case can be made for the Emergency Workers Organizing Collective (EWOC). Again, some activists may have met one another in the Bernie 2020 campaign, but the precondition of this project was the decades of independent organizing by the United Electrical Workers (UE). The UE has been training workplace militants in “non-majority” unionism—collective action in the workplace in the absence of formal recognition of National Labor Relations Board elections—for decades. And, again, the politics and organizational skills necessary for this organizing to succeed, especially building a self-confident layer of workplace activists who democratically control their own organizations, were not and will not be learned in top-down electoral campaigns like that of Sanders.

Finally, the claim that Educators of Bernie led the organizing for a wild-cat strike to shut down the NYC public schools at

the start of pandemic in March is simply not true. While many activist teachers involved in that effort had participated in Educators for Bernie, it was not the main organization behind this activity. That was the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE) inside the UFT, which includes many militants who did not participate in Educators for Bernie and who were workplace organizers for years before either of Sanders' presidential campaigns. MORE owes its militant strategy and tactics (and even its name) to the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) that transformed the CTU from the bottom up and led its historic strikes in 2012 and 2019.

Unfortunately, electoral campaigns with radical speeches and large rallies are not enough to spur people into struggle or prepare them to lead it. Jesse Jackson staged similar radical rallies in his presidential campaigns during the 1980s. But far from stimulating a rise in struggle, the campaign coincided with a radical downturn in strikes and social movements. There's a big difference between "inspiring" people to question the existing order, and the political and organizational tools and confidence necessary to build mass struggles that win.

Confusing Sanders Campaign with Movement and Working-Class Party

French and Gong also blur the lines between the Sanders campaign, class and social movements, and a working-class party. They contend that the campaign "brought countless workers into struggle on the basis of a shared working-class identity... By mobilizing millions around demands like Medicare For All and debt forgiveness, Sanders convinced many that a better world was possible—and that there was a movement willing to fight for it."

We believe this fundamentally confuses distinct political logics. Attending an election rally and voting for a candidate are not the same as a participating in a strike or disruptive

protest. In electoral campaigns, especially those with no democratic organization, working-class participants are reduced to the position of a passive spectator.

Most do not attend rallies, those that do at most listen, and only a minority get involved in the ins and outs of campaigning. Such campaigning work is directed from above. That is dramatically different from an actual movement when people come together in meetings to decide on demands, develop strategy and tactics, and plan actions. That's why we cannot call the Sanders campaigns movements.

Nor can we agree with French and Gong's claim that the Sanders campaign functioned like a worker's party. Of course, the campaign got many workers to donate to it and Sanders did "espouse open struggle with capitalists." But workers and their unions have been a source of funding for the Democratic Party since the 1930s, and left-wing Democrats then and Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988 supported strikes and demonstrations.

Unfortunately, these campaigns, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, derailed promising labor and social movements from launching an independent, mass working-class party and lured socialists and militants back into the Democratic Party.

Finally, Sander's campaign lacked the key characteristic necessary for the formation of a new workers party—democracy. Sanders, his staff, and hand-picked allies decided on the program, planning, and electoral strategy. There was no election of leaders, no open debates on platform and activity, and no democratic accountability of the candidate himself. The much vaunted infrastructure—finances, media and organizing apparatus—was not under the control of campaign and social movement activists, but the professional bureaucrats who ran the campaign and Sanders who had final veto power over everything. That's why, unlike a mass party, it was dissolved over night at the whim of the candidate.

Using our Enemy's Ballot Line: Dirty Break or Dead End?

Despite these realities, French and Gong persist in making the case that the Sanders' campaigns provide a model to be emulated. They and their comrades in DSA's Bread and Roses Caucus advocate a "dirty break" strategy in which DSA and other socialists use the Democratic Party ballot line to run candidates, win elected office, and build up a party inside the Democratic Party. Only when the time appears ripe, would they support a left break to form a new workers party. This strategy is based on a mistaken reading of the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party (MFLP), it underestimates the real and present danger of cooptation, and threatens to trap yet another generation of the left inside the Democratic Party.

In his article, "'Dirty Break' for Independent Political Action or A Way to Stay Stuck in the Mud," Kim Moody questions Eric Blanc's use of the MFLP as a historical precedent for Bread and Roses' strategy of using the Democratic Party ballot line. Moody points out the MFLP was part of a national movement to form a labor party. Where the "dirty break" was successful in getting candidates elected inside the Republican and Democratic parties, for example by Non-Partisan League (NPL) in North Dakota, the break never came, and no Farmer Labor Party (FLP) was ever formed. In other words, *"had the Minnesota NPL been more successful in this strategy there might never have been a FLP in that state."*

In fact, the successful FLPs were launched not through a dirty break strategy, but a clean break organized by socialists in a period of sharp social struggle. Moody therefore argues that "there has to be a significant pole fighting for a clean break if those attempting to work (in any way, with or without illusions) within the Democratic Party framework are to be drawn to a political break with that party. The social, economic, and political forces within the Democratic Party today, and the national spoiler effect to which they are so

attuned, make a *sui generis* internally-based split a virtual impossibility.”

Today, there is a real risk is that the “dirty break” strategy will lead, *in practice*, to a new realignment strategy, like that advocated by Sanders and AOC. They have no desire to launch a new party now or in the future, and instead call for socialists to take over the Democratic Party by contesting both national and “down-ballot” primaries. Most if not all of DSA’s candidates share this strategy and either reject or are indifferent to a future “dirty break.”

Meagan Day admits in a recent tweet that the “dirty break” and realignment strategies seem indistinguishable in practice. After laying out three socialist strategies in relationship to the Democratic Party—1) realignment; 2) clean break; and 3) dirty break—she admits that “1 and 3 are going to look similar up to a certain point.”

The Democrats will take advantage of this confusion to absorb leftists who work inside the party. While it is a capitalist party, the Democrats presents themselves as a broad tent, open to the left, workers, and oppressed people—but at the price of disorganizing our struggles and organizations.

They are experts at using both the stick and the carrot. So, they will do everything they can to prevent socialists from winning or getting reelected. But if socialists do win, they work hard to absorb and coopt them. It offers them appointments, the illusion of influencing its policies, and even will trot them out to market the party as a broad party to unions and social movements.

The Sanders campaigns are paradigmatic examples of how the Democrats neutralize and entrap the left. In both of his presidential runs, the establishment ensured that one of theirs won the nomination, first Clinton in 2016 and then Biden in 2020. In the second campaign, despite all the

hullabaloo about the possibility of Sanders winning, Barack Obama and the rest of the establishment anointed Biden after South Carolina, cleared away all his mainstream competitors, and backed him in a crushing defeat of Sanders.

Worse, in a tragic repetition of what the left always does inside the Democratic Party, when Sanders ended his campaigns in defeat, he rallied his supporters to support the neo-liberal, corporate establishment's candidates—first Hillary Clinton and now Biden. This year Sanders has worked especially hard to co-opt and discipline a left that is growing in numbers and self-confidence in the midst of the current uprising. He drafted AOC and other leftists into joint task forces with Biden's team, threatened to rescind the credentials of any delegate to the Democratic National Convention who engages in criticism of Biden, and chided those who refuse to support the “lesser of two rapists” as being irresponsible.

In this context, it hard to see any real space for the “dirty break” strategy. Almost no DSA candidates support it, and most if not all DSA elected officials will follow Sanders in voting and campaigning for Biden. Given these realities, we fear that more and more advocates of the “dirty break” will end up acting like “realigners”—contesting more and more “down-ballot” elections and being dragged further into the trap of Democratic Party politics.

Missing the Moment

French and Gong's perspective and strategy could lead Bread and Roses and DSA to miss the enormous opportunities for socialists to play a role organizing and leading in class and social struggles as well as election campaigns. The Black-led multiracial working-class uprising should be the basis of a sharp reorientation for the entire left. This is our Civil Rights movement and it should become the primary focus of all socialist activity

Rather than shifting to this focus, though, French and Gong's perspective and strategy continues to prioritize electoral work as the main vehicle to build the new party. This leads them to adopt a conservative timeline, projecting a 10-year slog through the Democratic Party to launch "a workers' party by, say 2030." We believe their priority is mistaken, we should instead focus on struggle especially the uprising, and our timeline for building the party must be radically accelerated.

Truth be told, independent working-class parties were never built through a slow accumulation of forces within a capitalist party. They have, historically, become possible during leaps in consciousness produced in the thick of struggles, often illegal, that challenge the existing order. It is in these struggles that socialists can cohere the militant minority of radical workers and oppressed people into parties that can challenge the capitalist parties and the system as a whole.

The overwhelming emphasis on electoral activity within the Democratic Party in DSA helps explain why it has been, as an organization, caught so flat footed by the uprising. Individual members, the Afrosocialist and Socialists of Color Caucus, and some chapters have responded. However, DSA as an organization has not shifted as rapidly as it must.

Why? We in DSA are still saddled with an organizational structure and political culture that is not set up to participate in and lead struggle from below. Our meetings are too infrequent to assess and participate in dynamic movements; we are fragmented into separate working groups; and most members only become active through electoral campaigns.

DSA today is facing the same challenge SDS did in the mid-1960s. In 1965, SDS faced the choice of continuing to follow the path laid out at its founding—the original realignment strategy of Michael Harrington—or to break with

Harrington, the AFL-CIO officials, and the Democratic Party liberals and organize a mass demonstration demanding immediate and unconditional withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam. They choose the latter, and SDS became the main organization for a generation of radical young people.

DSA today needs to make a similar choice—a continued focus on Democratic party election campaigns or active participation in the new movement, alongside the new generation of multi-racial radicals leading the uprising. If we don't shift, and we believe that we can, DSA will no longer be the main organization of the new radicalization. A new socialist organization—a new socialist party—can only be built in the middle of this uprising, debating its issues, strategies and tactics.

An Alternative Perspective and Strategy for Party Building

Prioritizing struggle does not mean adopting an ultra-left or anarchist position of abstention from electoral politics on principle. Such a position leaves the capitalist class unchallenged on the political terrain. However, the key task in electoral work is ensuring the political independence of the working class, even if in primitive form. Thus, in place of a “dirty break” strategy, we should run our own “clean break” candidates in local elections on our own socialist or labor ballot line.

We have no illusions that the human material—a significant minority of working and oppressed people that is ready to “waste” their vote on an independent party that gives a political profile to their struggle—exists today. However, in the context of an insurgent mass movement, there is more space than before to run independent socialist campaigns. This is especially true in single party municipalities controlled by the Democrats, where there will be no danger of being scapegoated for “spoiling” the elections. At the same time, we

should back independent socialist campaigns like that of Howie Hawkins as a “place holder” for a national independent party of working people. We should do this with no fear of the spoiler charge.

Local and state level campaigns, and especially any candidates elected, should be accountable to DSA and other socialist organizations. And they need to use their position in office to trumpet the demands of the movement and not adapt them to those of the capitalist parties. They need to resist the siren song of legislative “log-rolling” to get the least worst bill possible, and instead be advocates of our struggles and movement, supporting and advancing their demands in city councils, state houses, and federal government.

The new socialist left in the US that has emerged in the last five years needs to seize this opportunity and adopt this alternative perspective and strategy. If we do not, we risk being bypassed by the surging struggle from below to the detriment of building what we agree we need—a new mass party of workers and oppressed peoples.