

Democratic Socialists of America Faces Challenges at Convention

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The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the largest socialist group in the United States, will hold its biennial national convention during the first week of August, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the convention will be a virtual Zoom event. At the center of the convention will be debates about electoral politics and international issues, and while the membership seems largely united around the first, it is divided about the second.

Attending will be 1,300 delegates representing some 91,000 members in 240 chapters. DSA's separate and subordinate youth group Young Democratic Socialists of America, has some 130 chapters, but holds a separate convention. Without fear of Donald Trump and hope in Bernie Sanders, DSA seems to have lost some of its energy. There has been less membership participation in preparation for this convention. In my Central Brooklyn branch, only 15 percent of members voted for delegates, an accurate reflection of the small percentage of active members.

A few years ago, caucuses played little role in DSA, but today some ten national caucuses are dominant forces and will play a decisive role. Most of them already agree that DSA should continue its involvement in electoral politics by running candidates in the Democratic Party, but some only want to endorse DSA members and others to endorse only candidates who run as open socialists. A tiny minority in the leftwing argue that DSA should build an independent socialist party. While there is some debate about exactly how to do so, one can expect delegates to continue this strategy of endorsing and working for Democratic Party candidates.

In recent conventions DSA debated labor strategy though it is not a major item on the agenda at this convention. That discussion revolved around whether or not to adopt a rank-and-file strategy, that is, to concentrate on organizing rank-and-file workers to fight both labor bureaucrats and the bosses. That issue became blurrier, as work with rank-and-file workers, some argued, could be accompanied

by work with leftwing unions, or simply with support for unions in general (without any analysis of the bureaucracy's conservative role). Everyone agrees that DSA should become a more working-class organization, with more Black members, and more Latinos, and several resolutions propose ways to achieve that.

Most DSA members show little interest in international issues, yet they are likely to be the most contentious issue at this year's convention. DSA's International Committee has tended to adopt what has been called "campism," that is, the notion that the world is divided into geopolitical camps, in one, the United States and its allies, in the other, the "anti-imperialist powers" such as Russia, China, Iran, and Venezuela, which are not to be criticized. Others, like myself, emphasize internationalism from below, solidarity struggles for justice, democracy and socialism, everywhere, including places like Iran, China or Venezuela.

The DSA IC's campist leadership seeks alliances with the mass leftwing parties of other countries: the Workers Party of Brazil, the Movement for Socialism of Bolivia, or the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, for example. On the eve of the convention, an official DSA delegation visited Venezuela where it met with President Nicolás Maduro, but the delegation failed to meet with the socialist opposition to the government. Support for authoritarian governments doesn't speak well of DSA's commitment to democratic socialism.

Many members feel that DSA's National Political Committee hasn't been very effective over the last four years, but it isn't clear that the caucuses fighting for power at the convention can provide a clear path forward. Unfortunately, recent DSA conventions haven't done very well at making democratic debate over issues possible. One expects that it will be even more difficult at this convention being held virtually over Zoom.

Thanks to Andrew Sernatinger for sharing his views.